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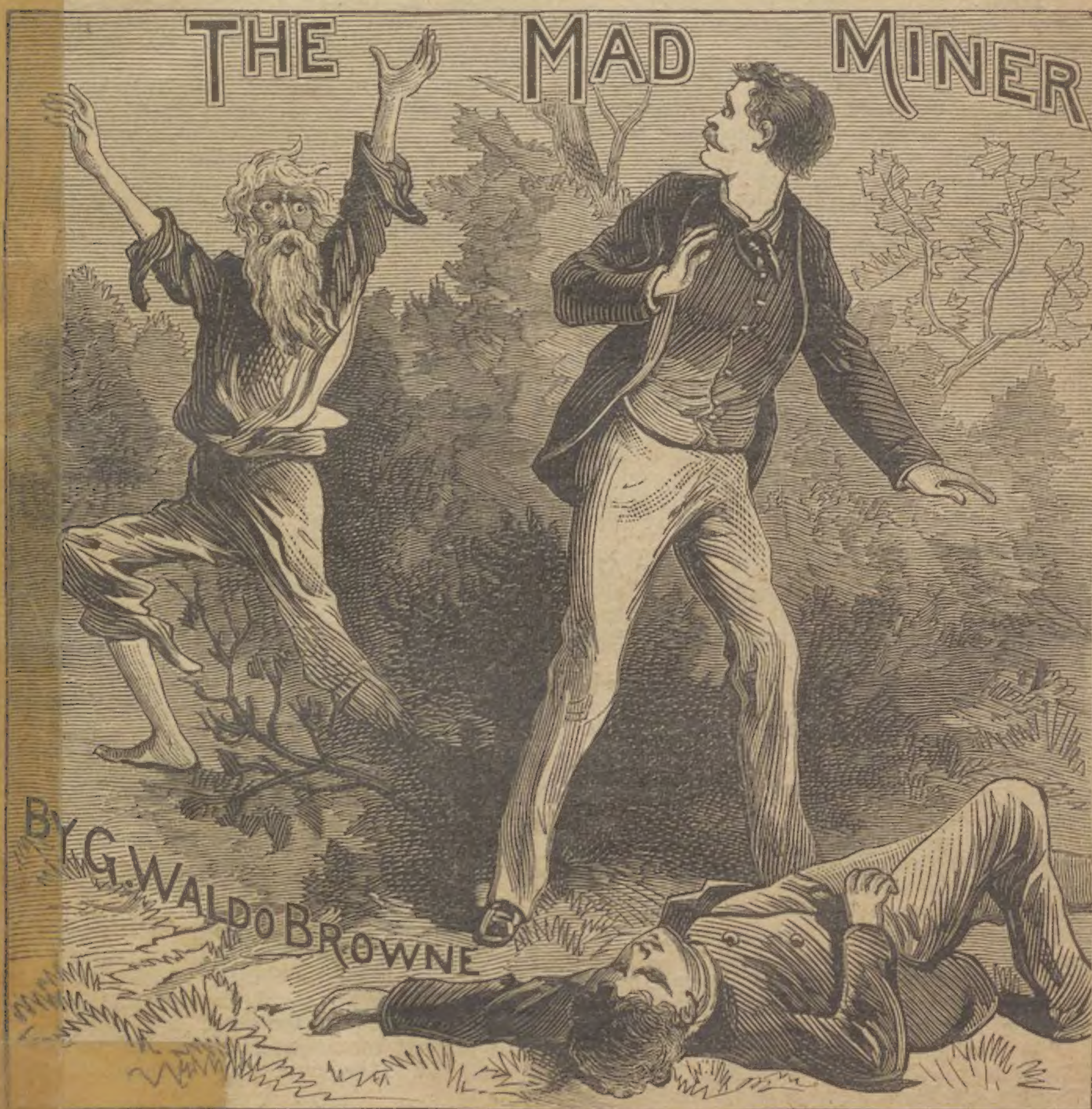
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WHEN A WILD, MANIACAL LAUGH RUNG ON THE AIR, AND WILD WIND, THE MAD MINER, WAS SEEN BY
SETH TO LEAP FROM THE THICKET WHERE HE HAD DISAPPEARED A LITTLE WHILE BEFORE.

The Mad Miner;

OR,

DANDY ROCK'S DOOM.

A Thrilling Story of the War for the
Valley of Gold.

BY G. WALDO BROWNE,
AUTHOR OF "DANDY ROCK," "DREAD RIDER,"
"TIGER OF TAOS," ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE RAFFLE FOR LIFE.

"LOOK!"

Over the mountains of California the setting sun was shedding its last rays.

Upon an overhanging cliff, that seemed to cling to the side of the rugged Silver Mountain with so slight a hold that it might be precipitated into the valley a hundred feet below at any moment, were outlined the forms of two foot travelers, who had paused there for rest.

The elder of the twain, and who gave utterance to the exclamation quoted as he peered over the brink of the ledge, was strongly built, and midway in the prime of life, with *physique* and dress once seen not likely to be forgotten. Ay, Dandy Rock, The-Man-from-Texas, needed no introduction to any one in Calaveras county. His raven hair, now tinged with gray, still falls down his brawny shoulders; he has changed but little, save that his costume is more gaudy than ever. Heavy gold rings, studs—in fact he seemed literally covered with the precious metal. Even his rifle, revolvers, bowie, etc., were mounted with gold. Well could he afford it, for all of Gold-dust Valley which lay at their feet with its untold wealth was his!

This second person was the strange Alpine Luke, otherwise known as Shadow, the Unlucky Miner—one of the most incomprehensible characters to be found in that land of unassorted men.

"Jeems Stopple!" Rock muttered, as he bent further out over the place. "Ef there ain't mischief, may the Old Boy tote me off fer oven-wood!"

His companion, gazing in the direction he pointed, saw a sight that caused him to utter a cry of horror, stoical as he was.

In the center of the valley was a score or more of paint-bedaubed savages dancing hither and thither in mad glee, while in their midst was a captive maiden, bound to a stake, around which was piled a line of brushwood ready to be fired.

It took but a glance for the miners to see that the victim was young and extremely handsome, and that she was meeting her ordeal bravely.

"It is that old Californian's darter," said The-Man-from-Texas, "and that half-breed, Evil Eyes, with his coyotes has routed his camp, I s'pect."

"Yes; but see! they are firing the brush! Can't we do something to save her?"

"We must try," was the terse reply, as the other continued to watch the savages' proceedings.

Soon the tiny spark applied to the dry wood was fanned into a flame, and rapidly it spread right and left, while the smoke arose in volumes.

What was to be done must be done at once.

Though in plain view of the Indians, the whites were in no real danger from them should they be discovered, for not one could scale the steep side of the mountain.

Higher and higher darted the fire till the heat was almost intolerable, and the poor victim began to writhe, and cry out in fearful distress.

Wilder and fiercer grew the yells of the savage horde, as they danced about.

Rock and Luke shuddered as they gazed upon the heart-rending scene.

"My gracious!" ejaculated The-Man-from-Texas, "I am going to speak to that half-breed coyote and see ef we can't make terms with him."

"All right," assented the Unlucky Miner; "anything to save that girl's life."

The next instant valley and mountain rung with the Texan's stentorian voice. The red fiends paused in their mad excitement, and clutching their implements of war with nervous hold, glared around in terror.

Again Dandy Rock gave utterance to his defiant cry.

Then the twenty dark visages were turned upward, when they discovered the daring twain looking down upon them.

"Hough!" cried the half-breed leader, as he raised his rifle to fire.

"Hold!" Rock yelled, instantly, as his own piece covered the chief. "Move a hand and I'll drop you!"

"'Tis The-Man-from Texas!" exclaimed the baffled wretch as he fell back.

"By Randel Rock, it am! and ef ye don't free thet gal thar, ye'll think the hull o' Texas ar' on yer heels! D'ye hyar, now?"

"What do you want?" gasped the one known as Evil Eyes.

"What do I want?" thundered Rock, fiercely. "Hain't I tole ye? I want that gal set free, and no more tomfoolery!"

"Ha-ha!" laughed the renegade, "and you think me will do it?"

"Look hyar!" the Texan replied, "Rock Randel ain't one to see sich a putty crætur' as thet gal put to sich an eend. Now jess walk that fire away from her and let her go in peace or I'll dig yer funeral es true es I kem frum old Texas. Hyar thet, old smoky-skin?"

"Bah! you talk like a fool! White gal die fast! See!"

Moaning most piteously the captive was frantically trying to break from the ligatures that held her. Rock trembled violently, as he saw her sufferings, and it required a mighty effort to keep from shooting the chief.

The next moment the half-breed turned his gaze back to the couple above, and cried, quickly:

"Would the white men have the captive's life spared?"

"Yes," they answered together.

"And are willing to accede to fair terms to have it done?"

Again he received an affirmative reply.

"Very well; the chief will talk."

"But for God's sake extinguish that fire or she will be burned alive while we parley," cried Luke.

When it was done so that she experienced no further agony from it, Evil Eyes again addressed the miners.

"Listen," he cried; "the chief sees before him two of his most hated foes. Long has he hunted them; but the end of the trail is not far away. He can capture them without trouble. But they ask for the life of the pale-face maiden, the Mountain Rose, and he will grant it upon one condition."

"What is it?" they asked in chorus.

"Will they accept the terms?"

"Anything reasonable; but not until we know them."

"Evil Eyes will let the captive go free, and promise that she shall not be molested while in the valley, if the white men will take her place," and he watched the twain closely, to see what effect his bold demand would have.

"Just ez I expected," muttered Rock. "but it might hev been wuss."

"You are right; and if the red brute would be satisfied with one of us, I for one am willing to take the girl's place."

"So I am," responded the Texan, "and ef it will work I think 'tis the best we can do."

"Look hyar," old saffron-face, ye ax too much! Thar ar' two o' us and the gal ain't but one. Either o' us are willing to swap chances with her, but ye can't hev both on us—though I reckon she's wuth half a dozen o' us," he added, under his breath.

The half-breed turned to consult his followers.

It took them but an instant to decide that while it really mattered not whether the girl lived or died, the possession of either of the men was worth much to them.

"Hark!" he spoke to the whites. "When one of you has surrendered himself into our hands the girl shall go unharmed."

"Good!" exclaimed Rock; "anything to save the purty one."

"And I am the one to do it. Can we depend upon the chief?" said Luke.

"I think so. But I am older than ye, Luke, and with little to live for, so I am going to take the gal's place."

"It is certain death, Rock; and you have friends who will miss you, while there is not one in the whole world who will mourn for me, and I had rather die than live if I can save another life by mine. So let me go, old friend, and tell them at camp the Unlucky Miner did one good act in his days."

"Wait! 'tain't fair for ye to go off so. I don't hev a fair shake! Let's raffle fer it."

"Just as you say," replied his companion indifferently.

Selecting a couple of small sticks of different lengths, Rock held them in his extended hand, saying:

"The one who gits the short one goes."

Slowly drawing the nearest, the Unlucky

Miner held it up to be measured by the other, when they found he had drawn the fatal right to offer his life for another's redemption.

CHAPTER II.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

"I AM to take the chances," said Shadow, slowly; "and I am glad of it. See that the girl escapes, Rock, and I ask no more."

"Gi'n us yer paw, old pard; ye ar' true grit and no side-show; I sha'n't fergit ye, Luke; and 'member ye hev one true friend who will stand by ye through thick and thin."

"Thank you, Rock. There, tell the half-breed I am coming, while I follow this path into the valley."

A cordial grasp of the hand, and Alpine Luke was gone on his awful mission.

Dandy Rock, seeing the enemy was getting anxious, said to the leader:

"Don't git narvous. My pard is on his way to ye."

"Then the Shadow takes the gal's place?"

"I reckon."

"Good!"

The Man-from-Texas, while he watched and waited, looked carefully to the priming of his fire-arms, for he felt there was to be "sum'thin' yit," as he would express it.

The captive, unable to comprehend the change in affairs, looked upon those around her in wonder.

Very soon Alpine Luke had reached the gorge, and approached his foes without a sign of hesitation.

Their fiendish faces lit with exultation, the horde could hardly keep from rushing upon him their satisfaction was so great.

Dandy Rock never allowed his gaze to leave them for an instant.

If there was treachery afloat he was not one to be caught napping.

As the Unlucky Miner reached them, the Indians gave a wild yell, and then followed a scene that defies description.

In an instant the voluntary captive was borne to the earth.

While his horde were in the act of doing this, Evil Eyes, who had planned for a double victory, raised his gun to discharge it at Dandy Rock.

The Texan was too quick for him, however, and before he could press the trigger a shot from the other's rifle sent him reeling back with a yell of pain.

As his followers saw him fall they uttered cries of amazement, and thinking they were attacked, sent a volley of bullets flying about their helpless prisoner, half of them at least striking his person.

His blood gushed forth from at least a dozen wounds; the doomed man fell over, lifeless.

Rock Randel gave utterance to one of his "old Texan war-whoops" that awoke the valley for miles, and emptied the second barrel of his rifle into their midst.

The savages, terrified, fled.

In the excitement the captive was left unharmed.

Rushing swiftly down the mountain-side the Texan quickly reached the spot.

"My God!" he groaned, as he bent over the still form of his companion, "Luke is stone dead!"

Literally riddled with bullets, and fairly bathed in blood, the body of the brave miner was indeed devoid of life.

"Randel Rock o' Texas! Ef I don't make this day's work cost 'em varmints their lives may I be thrown cold!"

He started up at the sound of rushing feet in the growth below.

Perhaps the red demons were coming back.

Quickly dashing forward, Rock reached the captive.

"Wal, my purty one, I'll save ye while I can," and he swiftly cut the thongs that bound her.

Nearly overjoyed at her release, the fair girl cried:

"May God bless you. But do you think we can escape?"

"Sart'in, as climbin' a pillar o' smoke. But, gracious! 'scuse me, I feel jess like a baby. Many's the tramp Luke and me hev hed together, and now 'em coyotes hev sent him on his long trail and left old Rock alone."

"Is your friend dead?" asked the maiden anxiously.

"Stone dead, miss. But—hark! the varmints are comin' back, and we must git."

Grasping her hand, and half-carrying her along the rock-strewn valley, he bounded away.

Only a few rods behind followed the savages.

Rock heard them give renewed yells as they reached Alpine Luke's body, and had it not been for his fair charge he would have turned and sold his life as dearly as possible.

As it was, for her sake he bent every effort toward escape.

"Golden Cave is not far away and if we can only git there we shall be safe for a time," said Rock, encouragingly.

The words had barely left his lips, however, when the cries of foes in front warned him of new danger.

Seeing a huge boulder near at hand that towered above his head and promised partial protection in case of an attack, he succeeded in reaching it, just as a dozen rough-looking miners came into sight.

At first look Rock's spirits rose as he saw they were white men, and felt that they were friends. But when he recognized the leader hope fled.

The others discovered them at the same moment, and paused abruptly.

At the head of the new-comers and facing The-Man-from-Texas with amazement, was his mortal foe whom he had long supposed dead.

"'Tis Buck Warner!" whispered the maiden, with a shudder, which told that she had before met Calaveras county's most noted desperado.

As she spoke, Rock raised his rifle, but before he could answer the outlaw exclaimed:

"Ho, Rock Randel! I was looking for you."

"What would you have, Gold-dust Buck? But I warn ye not to kem one step nearer fer my rifle don't burn powder fer nothin'!" gritted the Texan coolly.

"Put down that shooter, dog of Texas, or—"

"Hold! talk bizness, or I'll let daylight

through yer brain-pan afore ye can yip! I hed hoped ye hed turned up yer toes and ther honest people w'u'd hev peace."

"Ha-ha!" laughed the outlaw, mockingly, "Buck Warner ain't left Gold-dust Hollow free to ye yit! What is more, he ain't a-goin' to. I hev' now over thirty true men to aid me, and we will wage war till death ef ye don't give us our rightful own. What say ye, Man-from-Texas, will ye quit yer claim here and go away peacefully, or shall we have to throw you to the vultures?"

Drawing his commanding form to its full hight, while his eyes gleamed and sparkled as bright as the gold adorning his person, he answered quickly:

"Never! When Rock Randel goes out of Gold-dust Hollow he will not leave Buck Warner behind!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MAD MINER.

"HALT! another step and you die!"

Two horsemen coming up the Silver Mountain stage-road from Drytown, California, toward the close of a September day, 1853, suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen masked men, who covered their persons with as many rifles.

Quickly drawing rein they exclaimed:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Ha-ha!" laughed the leader, "you will find out to your sorrow if you don't carry a civil tongue. We are the protectors of Gold-dust Hollow, and we call ourselves the Valley Guard; does that suit you?"

"Stand aside and let us pass. We are peaceful travelers."

"Not so fast, my young fellows. Ain't you Seth and Charles Harlow?"

"We are."

"And you are going to the Golden-Cave?"

"Does that concern you?"

"Concern us! Sirrahs, it was to warn you from going there that we stopped you. We are the Valley Guard, and no one is allowed to pass us alive. So if you value your lives turn quietly back for Drytown."

"Suppos we refuse?"

"Then you shall swing from these saplings within ten minutes. We are not trifling; turn back or die! We will give you fifteen seconds to decide in."

The twain were young, brave and reckless, armed to the teeth, yet against the twelve or more they were hopelessly at odds.

"What say you, Charley?" asked the elder, his frank, handsome face all aglow with excitement, "shall we turn from our course like boys and be driven back to Drytown?"

"Never!" answered the other defiantly. "We have paid for a share in the mine, and I am not going to give up my part without a struggle!"

"Bravo for you, Charley! I am with you."

"Come—time's up!" cried the masked man.

"Remember that we can do with you as we wish, and you sha'n't leave this place alive unless you agree to our terms. That Man-from-Texas has no right to the Valley of Gold, and all who buy of him are humbugged, so we shall see that

no one works the claim till the rightful owners gain possession. Are you going back?"

"No!"

The terse reply surprised the others.

A moment only did the masked men hesitate, then the leader cried fiercely:

"Take them, boys! and show no mercy."

In a flash the others hurled themselves upon the defiant travelers.

The brothers discharged their weapons with a precision that sent two of their assailants to death.

The remainder, infuriated by the fate of their comrades, instantly surrounded them; and before they could repeat the shots they were overpowered.

"Bind 'em, boys, so they can't git away, and we'll show 'em how to shoot down in cold blood peaceful citizens," cried the chief as he tried to stay the crimson stream that gushed from a wound he had received.

"Yours to a T," grunted one of the gang. "W'ot next?"

"Jess fasten this bandage fer me, and then I'll pick out a tree. I reckon it will be a warning to other fools ef we leave our sign round hyar," and he laughed hoarsely.

Leading the way into the growth for a couple of rods, the outlaw leader stopped under the overhanging branches of a large oak.

"I reckon we can't find a better one," he said, "so let's swing the greenies up ter wunst."

"For Heaven's sake! would you murder us without a show for life?" cried Seth Harlow, as he saw preparations made to send himself and brother to eternity. "What have we done that you give us no mercy?"

"Look there!" and the ruffian pointed to his dead followers.

"But you compelled us to do that," protested the other. "You—"

"Enough said! We gave you fair warning, but you refused to heed it, and now you must suffer the consequence. The war for the Valley of Gold has begun. We are its defenders, and it's our duty to see that none hostile to its rightful owners go prowlin' round there. Kem, boys, hurry up with yer rope, and let's git this job off hands."

Cords of sufficient length were quickly procured, and the chief was about to adjust one around the neck of Seth Harlow, when a startling cry from his followers caused him to stop, in amazement.

"Good Lord, cap'en! look there!"

Not dreaming that any one was in the vicinity, the party were surprised by the discovery of a man leaning against the opposite side of the tree in a sitting posture, fast asleep.

At the sound of their exclamation, however, he awoke, and rubbing his eyes as if but half-awake, he staggered to his feet, and faced them indolently.

"'Tis Wild Wind, the Mad Miner!" ejaculated the leader, with a breath of relief.

"Ky-ya!" muttered the sleeper, scratching his head sluggishly.

A stranger specimen of humanity than this uncouth character was never seen in the Silver Mountain district.

Quite tall, with an angular form, dressed evi-

dently in the discarded garb of some miner of larger size, his face well-nigh covered with a mass of "tow-white" beard, while his countenance bore a blank, vacant stare, and his eyes continually wandered from object to object with a listless light never seeming to have any expression, and a tangled burden of hair falling down his neck of the same colorless hue of his whiskers, his every look and action proclaimed a harmless imbecile or lunatic.

"Hi!" he exclaimed, with a long-drawn yawn, "Wild Wind had big sleep."

"Git out of our way, ef ye don't want to git yer last sleep!" growled the masked leader.

If the "looney" understood the words he paid no heed to them, but watched the others with apparent wonder.

"Don't mind him, but run up that dog of a Harlow. The fool can't harm us."

The noose was fitted to Seth's neck, and then his horse was led forward for him to mount.

"Te-he!" laughed the witless stranger, and too much amused to stand still, he tried to help the outlaws lift the doomed man upon the animal.

"Out of the way, ye lunkhead!" snorted one, as he felled the too willing assistant aside.

"Oh-h! ky-ya! him hurt!" and the crazy creature danced about in frantic pain.

Suddenly the horse reared and plunged furiously, and before the surprised captors could secure him he broke from their hold and dashed madly off, bearing upon his back, clinging to the saddle with desperate energy, their prisoner, Seth Harlow.

Shots were instantly sent after the flying fugitive, but they flew wide of their mark.

To pursue him would be folly; and cursing themselves for their carelessness, the desperadoes turned more closely to their remaining captive.

The lunatic stood aloof, while his form quivered and teeth chattered like a frightened monkey, for all the world.

"The one who lets this dog escape shall swing in his place!" exclaimed the chief, as another rope was brought forward.

It took but a moment to fit it for its purpose, and then Charles Harlow was dragged beneath the oak.

Without giving him the chance to say a single word, the ruffians threw the end of the line over a limb, and willing hands seizing it, the victim was swung into the air.

Scarcely had his weight been lifted from the ground, when with a snap the cord parted, and he fell in a heap.

The outlaws looked upon each other in surprise.

The looney laughed and danced to and fro in wild glee.

"Try again," the chief commanded.

Once more the rope was prepared, and the villains stood ready to execute their leader's order.

"Draw him up slowly this time, and see that there is no blundering," he fiercely warned, as he raised his hand as the signal for the execution, when, with a low cry of pain, he reeled back, and fell at the foot of the tree.

Startled and amazed, the others turned to

him, to discover the haft of a huge knife protruding from his side in the region of the heart! The Texan realized that he was dead, but but who had done the deed?

In awe they glanced wildly about them, but saw not the assassin.

Even as they gazed another of their number fell in the same mysterious way!

Speechless and spellbound, they could not move.

The lunatic, too, was transfixed with terror.

A moment of dread, and then recovering their activity once more, but heeding the prisoner no longer, they fled in mad affright.

With a discordant laugh the witless unknown followed, making the woods echo with his meaningless cries.

CHAPTER IV.

ROCK SEES A "SPOOK."

GOLD-DUST BUCK uttered a cry of surprise as he heard Rock's defiant answer.

"Then you wont git?" he growled, hoarsely.

"No! I own all Gold-dust Hollow, and the cave, too, and I am not goin' to be druv out o' it by ye, or enny other coyote this side o' Texas."

"Bah! But who is that with you?"

"None o' yer bizness, old 'rearer."

"It is the old Californian's daughter," one of Warner's followers affirmed.

"You are right, Stockton Sharp, and we are in luck.

"Rock Randel, you have with you a person whom of all others I desire. I had her in my power once to-day, but somehow she managed to escape. Now, I have one more offer to make you. Surrender that girl into my hands, and I promise I will leave Gold-dust Hollow forever, to never trouble you again. What say you to that?"

"Oh, kind sir!" cried the maiden to the Texan, with anxious pleading, "don't let that dreadful man get me! He shot down poor father and mother this afternoon, and he wants to carry me off with him! I had rather die than for him to get me!"

"Never fear, my purty one," replied Rock, encouragingly; "I'll stand by ye till the last."

To the impatient outlaw he cried loudly:

"Do ye think I am meaner than a Digger Indian? I am ready to die for this gal, and will do it afore ye shall hev her!"

A derisive laugh was the only answer, and the tug of war was at hand.

The-Man-from-Texas glanced hastily about for a way to elude his foes.

The rock extended for some distance, but in nowise offered him any more protection than that gained from his present position.

At that moment the outlaw sent the contents of their rifles flying about his head, and he felt one bullet strike his arm.

"Hooray!" shouted the assailants, and threw themselves forward *en masse*.

Dandy Rock had reloaded his weapons ere this, and the first shot that left its fateful muzzle carried death to one of the desperadoes.

"This way, purty one," and he darted back to the rear.

Around the huge boulder the Texan led his charge.

As he came out on the other side, he saw to his horror the horde of savages coming up the ravine.

Between two foes he was lost!

Turn right or left, and his race was up.

"I will die game!" he muttered. "I fear, miss, it is all up with us! But be brave and we may escape. I—"

A wild shriek from the Indians drowned his speech.

Then as one body they rushed upon—

Ha! At that very instant when they seemed to have victory within their grasp, their cries of exultation changed to yells of terror; and turning in a mad medley they actually fled, without discharging a single shot.

Wonder-struck, Rock hesitated.

The enemy behind seeing the precipitate flight of those in front, paused.

Then a wild cry rung from the mountain-side above, which caused friend and foe to glance hastily upward.

In the weird twilight was seen a wild, uncivilized-looking being, with flowing hair and tattered garb.

"The Mad Miner!" exclaimed Gold-dust Buck.

"Wild Wind, the Crazy Miner!" chorused his followers.

If the outlaws were for a moment inactive, Rock wasn't.

Improving his chance, he dashed into the valley and along its bottom, keeping his companion close by his side.

"Let the varmints gawk ef they want to! I'm much obleeged to thet wild miner fer letting us off so cute, ain't ye, miss?"

"Oh, yes; but you are hurt!"

"Never mind thet; 'tain't nothin'.

By this time the outlaws rallied; but the Texan had got a start of them that promised escape.

He heard them rushing through the growth for a moment, and then all sound of them died away.

Perplexed at their seeming withdrawal from the chase, he could but think they were hunting him by stealth.

Had he seen the two lifeless forms they had left behind he would not have wondered at their movement.

At last, when he felt that they had little more to fear from their foes for the time, Rock paused, and turning to the maiden, said:

"Wal, miss, I reckon we needn't hurry so like scart bufflers now. I guess 'em coyotes hev gone to their den. Hev ye enny perticular place yer want ter go? And may I ax yer name and whar ye kem from, purty one?"

"Certainly. My name is Lenore Cassa, and in company with our family I was coming up the Remoure and going to the lower valley, where father owns a gold claim. We were attacked to-day by a party of men called the 'Valley Guard,' and I was carried off, to be delivered over to the half-breed and his savages. Oh, sir, you can't know what I have suffered, and if it had not been for you, I should have been killed ere this. But poor father and mother!

I must go to them. I sadly fear they are no more! Excuse me if I would know to whom I owe my life before I go."

The Texan hesitated to speak, he was so engrossed with the fair vision before him. Never had he seen one who seemed so beautiful to him.

"You will at least tell me your name," she repeated.

"Scuse me, Miss Lenore," he stammered; "I—I am only Dandy Rock, The Man-from-Texas, es they call me."

"Can it be possible?" she cried. "I have heard father speak of you often. How can I ever pay you for saving my life, Mr.—Mr.—I don't believe I know your name after all."

"Call me Rock," he said, quickly. "Never mind the pay; I—I am more than paid by one look of your purty eyes."

"May God bless you!" she murmured, not at all offended by his rude sincerity. "But I must go back to my friends. They will be worried about me."

"Whar did ye leave the old folks, and them as war with 'em?"

"Down where the creek flows over the ledge and disappears into the canyon."

"I know the place jess like a alligator in my dinner. I guess we hed better go down to the 'city,' and I'll git sum o' the boys to go down with me, and leave ye thar. These are pesky onsartain times."

With the words Rock started down the valley, heading for the mining settlement that lay to their right.

Conscious that they were likely to be discovered any moment by the enemy that must still be lurking in the vicinity, he was constantly on the alert.

It was while thus cautiously advancing that he fancied he heard footsteps.

Sinking back into the shadow of a clump of bushes, he waited in breathless silence.

It was then getting quite dark, so that he could distinguish nothing plainly. But in a moment he saw the form of a man leave the growth and come in his course a few rods ahead.

He was in the act of drawing up his rifle ready for instant work, when something in the new-comer's appearance caused him to drop the weapon and watch him intently.

The person slowly crossed the clearing and disappeared into a neighboring thicket.

Rock seemed like one paralyzed, and he never removed his gaze till the other was gone.

Then springing to his feet with a breath of relief, he cried.

"May I be turned into a whirlwind ef thet wa'n't the spook o' Alpine Luke!"

When he recovered himself enough to go on, he examined the place where the form had crossed the path, but nothing could be seen of him.

"Jess es I sed!" he muttered, "Luke don't rest right. But, Jeems Stopple! I hope his spook won't git arter me!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MAD MINER IN A NEW ROLE.

HALF stunned by his fall, Charles Harlow lay bound hands and feet.

At first he could hardly realize that he was saved.

Where was Seth? Impatiently he waited and hoped for escape, all the while frantically trying to free himself from the ligatures that held him so securely.

Thus twenty minutes passed and he was fast losing his strength, when the sound of footsteps startled him; and the next instant to his unspeakable joy, his brother appeared in sight.

"Are you hurt, Charles? and where are the ruffians?" was Seth's greeting.

"The villains have fled. I am not hurt, but bound like a captive rabbit."

"So I am," said the other, advancing and holding up his hands showing that they were still tied firmly behind him.

"My horse threw me," he said, in explanation, "and by this time is half-way to Drytown. I think yours has followed him, for I heard him galloping that way. I was not much hurt by my fall, but for my life I cannot burst these bonds. Let me see what I can do for you."

After a long and patient trial he succeeded in clearing Charles's wrists of their thongs, and at last both were free.

"Where shall we go?"

"On to Gold-dust, by all means," replied Seth; "we can reach the place to-night. Ha! I believe I can see the 'city' now."

Away to the south and east of them sure enough was to be seen a considerable collection of rude huts and even buildings that showed signs of respectability. As Gold-dust was the only settlement in the vicinity, of course it must be the destination they had come so far to reach.

"You are right, Seth," exclaimed the younger quickly; "we must go on. We are near our journey's end. Are you still as firm as ever to carry out the object of our coming here? and are you still confident that this is the valley the Californian was seeking?"

"Quite so. Dandy Rock is not easily mistaken, though I did deceive him into the belief that we were coming here to pan his gold, when it was really to further a selfish purpose—to finish the work of our life."

"That is our secret, Seth; and be careful how you whisper it, for trees may have ears, you know. We gave our oaths to our dying father that we would hunt down his mortal foe, even if we had to search the entire world; and, brother, we will not forget our pledge. But come; if we would reach yonder settlement before dark, we must be moving."

"Those bodies must lie here until their friends take them away," the other said, as he turned to the dead "Guards." "My faith, their death is a mystery to me. It must have been some of their own number who did it!"

"I can't say. All I know, whoever did it saved my life. But we had better appropriate their weapons in the place of the ones they took from us."

Quickly arming themselves with the revolvers of the slain, the brothers were soon hastening toward the valley which lay below.

For some time they advanced in silence, when

they were brought to a sudden stand-still by the sound of a voice near at hand.

They were now midway in the hollow, and a thick, tangled growth of brushwood encircled them.

Without a word Seth cautiously approached the spot from whence came the sound, while Charles followed close behind.

The next moment they came in sight of a small clearing, and saw with surprise the form of a man in the edge of the growth beyond.

A second glance showed them that it was the Mad Miner.

He was sitting flat upon the ground, and seemed busily engaged, though they could not discover his work.

Wondering what his actions meant, they crept still nearer, not caring to arouse him.

They soon saw that he was simply piling a lot of small stones he had picked from the creek near by into a square, much as children are wont to do when at play.

Slightly vexed that they should have taken so much trouble for nothing, Seth was about to speak to him, when Charles motioned for him to remain silent.

"Let's watch him a few moments before we make our presence known," he said.

More out of curiosity than anything else they continued to note the movements of the idiot.

Carefully he piled the pebbles one above another till all had been used. Then, with a low, senseless exclamation he tore them down and began his task anew. This was repeated several times, and still the diligent worker never turned from his occupation.

Out of patience at last the listeners were about to speak to him, when they saw him abruptly pause, and gaze intently down the valley.

Only an instant, however, when he resumed his work.

Glancing in the direction the other had, the brothers started with amazement when they saw a couple of men arise as if from out of the earth.

Both were heavily framed and wore masks on their faces.

Unable to retreat, even if they wished, the hiding twain crouched still lower in the undergrowth and waited in breathless silence.

"Hist!" exclaimed the foremost of the newcomers, "I thought I heard some one speak."

"Only your fancy, Sam; there isn't a living soul within a league, I'll venture. That Valley Guard of mine was a capital idea. But I don't see where Joe Dickey is. He left this afternoon with a dozen or more of the Guards to corral those Harlow brothers. It can't be he has made a mis-go."

"I'll risk True-Blue Joe every time," muttered his companion. "But are ye sure, old pard, thet that Onlucky Miner hes got back into ther valley?"

"Oh, yes; there is no mistake. But it won't do for him to stay here any more than it will for that Man-from-Texas."

"Blame 'em! They don't either of them die easy!"

"They are only mortal, and a steady hand will lay them out any day."

"I dunno! Thet ar' long-haired Texan ain't

to be sneezed out of the way, I tell ye. Menny's the time he has been squarely corraled, but he alwus comes out at the top o' the heap! And as fer thet Shadow, I tell ye, cap'en, I don't believe the lead was ever run es w'u'd earth him!"

"Nonsense, Stockton Sam; you are not the man I have taken you for, if you fear that sneaking outcast, Alpine Luke. Ha! listen to me, and I will tell you how we can remove both the Texan and him, and get possession of the Golden Cave. I have this minute thought of a plan."

With bated breath the brothers listened.

"What is it?" asked Stockton Sam, as his companion hesitated.

"Well, no matter ef I don't tell you my full plan. Enough if I look after Randel. No matter how, but I will see that he is disposed of. You must look after the Unlucky Miner, and you have nearly all of Gold-dust Hollow to a you there. To-morrow he and the Texan w prospect the cave lead. Doubtless they will alone, or nearly so. Get Evil Eyes and his sages to assist you, and the game is yours. If y bag The-Man-from-Texas, all right; but if y fail I will cook his fowl for him."

"Ye are an old coon, pard. Gi'n us yer pa"

"Hist!" exclaimed the other, sudden "what was that noise?"

His companion shook his head.

Both listened attentively, and borne to th ears was the faint, clinking sound made by W Wind as he carelessly piled up his colum stones.

"'Tis only the water rushing along the roc bed of the crik," Stockton Sharp affirmed.

"I doubt that," and plunging through the thicket, he discovered the idiotic worker.

At sight of them the latter sprung half to his feet and scattered the stones right and left; but quickly sinking back again, he resumed his occupation with a laugh.

"Furies!" cried the ruffian leader; "that fool made the noise," and with a breath of relief he turned to leave, when Sam said:

"Look hyar, cap'en, he mus' have heard every word we said."

"What of it? He can't harm any one."

"Hookey, old pard, we hed better g'in him his walkin' papers. 'Tis surest."

"You are right," his chief answered, quickly. "It will remove all risk," and even as the words left his lips he gave a low whistle, when almost instantly a dozen armed men bounded up from the ground into sight.

Seth and Charles Harlow came near betraying their presence with a start of terror as they saw the coarsely-dressed, heavily-bearded throng appear as if by magic.

Still the intended victim, the Mad Miner, continued to pile up the stones as unconcernedly as ever.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH AND MYSTERY.

"CAPTURE the fool!" commanded the masked leader, as his followers gathered around him.

In the twinkling of an eye the horde overpowered the resistless idiot and bore him forward into the center of the clearing.

"Ky-ya!" and the strange being laughed in high glee.

"Look here, Wild Wind," cried the chief, "what are you in Gold dust Hollow for?"

Without comprehending the words the other gazed vacantly about, finally bursting into a violent fit of laughter.

"Satan take yer! Can't you speak?"

"See him run! see him hop! He purty bird!" and the captive pointed excitedly at a ground-hog near at hand.

"Tain't no use to spend yer wind on him," growled Stockton Sam. "He's staring mad."

"Lash him to yonder sapling, and we will see if he can't understand another kind of talk."

Quickly dragging him to the designated tree, the bandit began to secure him to its body, the mad Miner all the while wildly protesting against it.

"Oh—oh—h! him pinch! Wild Wind be good, golly let him go."

His captors, unheeding his piteous appeals, made him fast, and two of the gang were waected to shoot him.

"'Tis quickest done," the chief had said. "Let there be no waste of powder," and the ain were ordered to take their positions.

It was a trying moment to the concealed others. They felt it their duty to lend their will to the doomed man, and to do it was to jeopardize their own escape—ay, it seemed that it must seal their fates!

"If we only had our rifles," whispered Seth; "but we must try these revolvers, and if the worst comes we can only sell ourselves as dearly as possible. You take the shorter one, and I will try my hand on the other marksman."

Hastily raising their weapons they prepared for the shot.

Unconscious of their impending fate, the outlaws covered the cowering prisoner with their rifles.

Then the sharp click of a pistol-lock cut the air, instantly succeeded by a second.

Every outlaw turned toward the thicket concealing our adventurers in dismay.

The twain shuddered as they saw the disadvantage and deadly peril the failure of their weapons had drawn upon them.

The quick eye of the outlaw chief caught sight of their white faces, and he saw their forms through the breaks in the foliage.

"Ho, boys!" he yelled, "foes are in ambush. Quick! cut them down before they rally!" and with a revolver in either hand he sprung forward, closely followed by the horde.

The brothers simultaneously leaped to their feet, and defiantly faced their enemies.

Again the hammers of their firearms fell, and once more the weapons failed!

No better than unarmed they would have retreated, but 'twas too late for that!

Hemmed in they were forced to take the odds.

Confident of an easy victory, the ruffians fell pell-mell upon them.

Two of the foremost assailants fell from the strong blows dealt by the desperate pair.

Then Seth Harlow felt a stinging sensation in his left arm and the limb dropped by his side.

A wild, terrifying shout suddenly echoed above the confusion of the strife.

With sharp cries the foremost bandit reeled to the earth.

Scarcely had he fallen when another shared a similar fate.

The others abruptly paused.

As the living desperadoes gazed upon their slain comrades, they started back with horror.

Protruding from the breast of either was the haft of a huge knife!

Spellbound, they made no move for a moment.

The Crazy Miner had dropped at the foot of the tree and was laughing and crying out in wild glee.

An instant thus, and with no warning word or sound, one of the terrified ruffians suddenly fell forward and dropped to the earth lifeless.

The masked chief turned the body and saw the fatal instrument of death—the knife!

They could stand no more. As the Valley Guard under the live oak had flown, they fled—fled for dear life!

With a piercing scream Wild Wind bounded up. A laugh—a shout—a wave of the hand—and he rushed away after the fleeing outlaws.

Once more Seth and Charles Harlow owed their lives to the mysterious slayer.

"What can that mode of warfare mean? and who can the unknown destroyer be?"

Seth asked the question, as they examined the slain, though he could not expect an answer.

"I can't tell," said Charles; "but let's get away from here, Seth, while we can."

"You are right. But do you think we can find this place again? We must find where those ruffians came from, for I believe they have a rendezvous near here."

"More than likely. But it will not do to delay now. Ha! look there!"

The exclamation was caused by the sudden appearance of a man rushing like mad down the valley.

"The Mad Miner!" ejaculated Seth, as he caught sight of the streaming white hair and haggard face. "Let's follow."

Quickly dashing forward they hurried after the other, though they found it no easy task to keep him in view.

For some distance down the hollow the race continued.

They had followed a small stream known as Silverstone Creek.

Where the brook made a sharp turn they saw Wild Wind leave its bank and dart into the thick growth growing to the right.

In an instant the idiot disappeared.

"Let him go," said Seth. "We have not the time to follow him; and neither do I see how it would benefit us."

They turned to retrace their course and left the strange fugitive to pursue his way in peace.

The brothers had not gone far, however, before they paused in glad surprise.

"'Tis gold!" whispered Charles, as if fearing the trees would hear his words, while they examined a lot of shining particles taken from the bed of the stream.

"Yes, gold!" Seth echoed.

For some moments they eagerly looked for the treasure, and when at last they joined each other on the bank of the stream, they clasped hands in delight.

"Our fortunes are made!" cried Charles. "There is gold enough here to make us nabobs."

"You are right, brother," replied the other, quickly. But a shadow suddenly flitted across his handsome face, as he added: "We must not think of the gold, Charles. At least not until we have fulfilled our dying father's wishes."

"Why continue our foolhardy purpose longer, when we must throw away such a chance as this? Seth, I say let vengeance—"

"Hush, brother! You have not forgotten the pledge we made to our father? This gold is not ours, and we must leave it to continue our work."

"Not I, Seth. Here is untold wealth, and The-Man-from-Texas, when I saved his life in Stockton last week, said we should share the Valley of gold with him. Come, brother, let's leave vengeance alone, and—"

Suddenly the speaker was cut short in his words. Without a cry—without a warning sound—he fell backward and dropped to the earth like one dead!

Spellbound, his brother gazed upon him.

Then a wild, maniacal laugh rung on the air, and Wild Wind, the Mad Miner, was seen by Seth to leap from the thicket where he had disappeared a little while before, and leap madly away, looking more dreadful than ever.

"Oh, brother!" cried the living one, as he fell by the other's side.

A single look into the glassy eyes, one grasp of the cold hand, and he reeled back with the word spoken in awful anguish:

"Dead!"

Ten minutes must have passed before Seth Harlow recovered himself enough to move.

The blood was welling from the stricken man's mouth and nostrils, and he was surely beyond earthly scenes.

"This is terrible!" groaned the other.

Then as he staggered to his feet he said:

"I can not leave your body here to be torn in pieces by the foul vultures. No; I must give your remains burial, Charles. It is all I can do for you."

Selecting the most favorable spot, he began his laborious task.

Loosening the earth with sticks, and throwing it out with his hands, he kept steadily at his work for full an hour.

At last he had a pit deep enough to receive the body; and thinking to cover it with the loose earth and stones, he washed his hands in the stream, and started to bear it to the spot, when to his amazement it was not to be found!

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER VICTIM.

SILVERSTONE "City" was but a small collection of rude huts, which seemed to have been thrown together promiscuously. But like all mining settlements it was alive with bustle and excitement every night, in strange contrast to the unnatural quietness that pervaded it while the inhabitants were delving in the mines.

Dandy Rock first conducted Lenore Cassa to

the only dwelling in the place that merited the name of a house, and owned by one Tim Cotton—Temperance Tim—who was postmaster, and one of the leading spirits in the valley, besides being, better than all, a strictly honest man.

Leaving Lenore there, with the promise that he would do all he could toward finding her parents, Rock sought the loafers' rendezvous of Silverstone—the Bang-up "hotel."

At this place he found full a score of men already congregated, and others still coming.

"Wal," drawled a tall specimen of a miner, savoring strong of the mountain air, "ef hyar ain't The-Man-from-Texas kem to grace our company may I be skulped by a Pawnee!" Stomp up, old hoss, and hev a bu'ster o' p'izen."

"Twas seldom Rock ever visited any of the drinking "shebangs," unless on urgent business, for he had learned long before that to trifle with the tempter was certain destruction, and those around knew that something new must be "in the wind."

"Wal, I reckon this 'coon don't chip in to-night, Pete. Much obliged to ye all the same," was Randel's reply to the ex-mountaineer.

"Dang my buttons! ef ye ain't a quare one! Howsum'dever, hyar's fer old Rocker Hill Pete!" and the speaker drained the glass himself.

"What's up, Rock?" asked one known as Flying Ned, looking up from his game of cards.

"The old Nick's to pay!" exclaimed the Texan. "Ye all know o' old Cassa, the Peura ranchman? Wal, he and his folks war all gobbled up by Buck Warner and his cattle down by Silverstone Ledge. I hev jess left his darter down to Temperance Tim's, and she wants us to hitch up and see ef we can find ennything o' her daddy and folks. What say ye, old beavers, will ye jess help take the trail?"

As Rock concluded, no one ventured to reply.

"Look hyar!" he cried, excitedly, "ef any of you don't care to take the lead with me, I am goin' alone. It sha'n't be said Rock Randel wouldn't help the 'flicted."

Rock was nettled by the others' indifference, and he made no attempt to hide it.

At last one of the bystanders stepped forward. He was a strongly-built young man, with a cleanly-shaven face and flashing eyes.

"I don't see any need fer you to get so up-pish, Rock Randel," he said, in a low but distinct tone. "What proof can you give of the truth of what you have said?"

"What proof?" repeated the Texan, touched to the quick. "Jess walk down to the post-office and see Miss Lenore."

"Of course I meant no offense, Rock," the other hastened to say, as he saw Randel fairly trembling with passion. "But are you sure it is no game laid to trap us?"

"Cooney Burke," cried The-Man-from-Texas, drawing himself proudly erect, "d'ye think I have tramped nigh onto forty years, until I know every inch o' the kentry from Silver Mountain to Texas, and am the coon to be led on a blind trail now? Ef enny o' ye don't choose to help me, I shall go alone. Rock Randel ain't no coyote. Wag!"

"You have a level head and true grit, Rock Randel, but I fear you are on a wild chase now. However, I have expressed my fears, and if you

still persist in your determination, why I am with you."

"So am I," chimed in a voice from the crowd, and Seth Harlow advanced to the side of the Texan.

Allow us to say that young Harlow had had no trouble in leaving the valley after the scene last recorded. Though suffering the keenest pangs of sorrow at his brother's untimely fate, he had sought Silverstone, and was determined to carry out the purpose of his coming there.

In a moment five others joined Burke, and Rock's party numbered eight all told.

"When shall we start?" asked one.

"Now," answered the Texan, quickly. "It is less than an hour's ride to the ledge, and we don't know but we are needed this minnit."

"All right," said Conrad Burke, "I will be ready in five minutes."

A quarter of an hour later, the little cavalcade had turned their backs on the Silverstone, and were riding leisurely down the creek by that name.

The waning moon was not more than an hour's time above the western horizon, and the sky was fast becoming overcast, so that it would soon be a dark night.

Rock led the way, while close behind, in Indian file, followed the others.

When perhaps a couple of leagues of the broken land had been passed, the Texan drew rein.

"We are almost there," he said, in an undertone, "and we had better tether our animals, while we peg on on foot."

Quickly acting on the suggestion, the horses were led into the deeper shadow of the forest, and secured, when, leaving them under the charge of one of their number, the remainder resumed their course on foot.

Like shadows, in the somber darkness, the seven men crept stealthily forward.

Finally they reached the edge of a small clearing.

Pausing here they beheld several dark objects crouching midway in the opening.

"We can't be far from where old Cassa was tacked," said Rock. "Jeemes Stopple! look thar!"

The exclamation was caused by a sudden movement of the creature's ahead; and the next instant a dozen dark beings bounded swiftly for the opposite forest.

They were wolves.

"There is meat 'round or they would not be prowling here," affirmed Burke.

"So I reckon," muttered The-Man-from-Texas fearlessly advancing.

Near the center of the clearing they discovered the half-devoured carcasses of a yoke of oxen, and near by the ruins of a canvas-covered wagon.

"'Twar old Cassa's rig-out," cried Rock, "and hyar's where the coyotes corraled him!"

"Yes, but look there!" exclaimed Conrad Burke, pointing to what was unmistakably the remains of human beings.

"We are too late to be of service," said Seth Harlow. "No doubt all have perished."

"We might have known it," muttered Burke.

A moment's silence followed as the little group

gazed upon the mangled dead, half-eaten by the wolves.

In the brief interval one of the startled men suddenly pitched forward and fell, to all appearances, lifeless!

The survivors started in terror and glanced wildly about.

Not a living being was in sight. Not a single sound had broken the deathlike stillness.

Rock Randel was the first to move, and bending over their fallen companion, he turned his body face upward, crying out huskily:

"He's a goner!"

The others were spellbound.

"We must not stay hyar," ejaculated the Texan, "or we shall all be rubbed out. Kem, let's git!"

Bearing the body of their dead comrade with them, the party were nothing loth to retreat.

In the hurry and excitement no one thought of looking for the cause of the victim's death.

With one accord they dashed away from the fateful spot.

In a moment the timber was reached, a little to the right of their entrance, and though expecting death from every quarter, they were for a moment paralyzed by the sudden appearance of a score of armed savages.

"Howgh—owgh—gh!" rung the fierce war-whoop, and every bush and stone seemed to emit the demoniac foe!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NIGHT PHANTOM.

EVIL EYES led his followers on to what promised an easy victory.

A bitter mistake!

Quickly regaining their usual self-possession, the miners dropped the body of their late companion, and answering the savages yell for yell, sprung to the combat with purpose firm and will undaunted.

Rock felled two of the horde at his first fire, and then clubbing his rifle he fought them hand-to-hand.

The first volley of the assailants left but four of the whites to carry on the struggle; and one of them almost instantly broke and fled.

'Twas Cooney Burke.

Rock, Seth and Flying Ned alone strove to beat back the outnumbering enemy.

"Hooray fer old Texas!" and another red-skin bit the dust.

Fairly crazy now, the intrepid Texan threw aside his rifle, the stock splintered to atoms, and with a revolver in either hand, sent shot after shot among the shrieking savages.

Seth Harlow swept them down right and left, while Ned Austin did good work.

Fierce was the combat, wild the scene.

Awhile the stout-hearted trio held their own; then, with a despairing cry, Flying Ned yielded to the overwhelming power. He was borne to the earth.

Seth fought in vain to keep off his assailants. Only one form rose among the frantic Indians, and that towered a head above them. The-Man-from-Texas, all the fire of his nature awakened, seemed unconquerable. Nay, at last he staggered blindly to and fro. He almost fell.

At this very critical instant when the tide of

battle had turned, another form burst upon the scene.

With flowing light hair and beard and tattered garb, a wild-looking man sprung toward the savage horde.

Unheeding alike their deafening yells and deadly blows, nothing stayed his course.

Glaring upon him in amazement, the victors' cries turned to shrieks of terror. The fight suddenly ended. With one accord the red-men fled like frightened hares.

Close upon their heels pursued the strange being, and thus all disappeared.

"Jeems Stopple!" cried Rock, with a breath of relief, "ef thet don't kerflumix me! But didn't that Wild Wind jess walk through 'em slick! He's jess the chap fer fun."

"Where are the others?" asked Seth, freeing himself from the clutch of a dying savage, and joining the Texan.

"Dunno. Mebbe it was old-fashioned, hop-in' fun. Let's look over the funeral."

The two made a hasty examination of the slain, but to their surprise they could not find one of their friends, save the body of him who had been killed so mysteriously.

Quite a number of the dead Indians lay about, but most assuredly only the form of a solitary white.

"Let's git," whispered Rock, "I reckon spooks are out, and we hev got to huff it like the Old Nick in hot water! S'pose we hunt up the hosses?"

So they returned to the place where they had left their animals, to find to their increased surprise that they were gone!

"Wal, this am a go!" muttered Rock. "Them pesky varmints toted 'em off, and we shall hev to huff it all the way to Silverstone, Howsum'dever. I reckon that is better than being skulped."

"Shall we go direct to the city?"

"Sart'in. Straight es a bee-line in Jinary. We ar' a goner ef we don't! Hark! I hear the 'tarnal coyotes a-screaching like mad peccaries! Kem; lively's the word with us!"

Quickly striking into his loping gait, Rock hurried up the valley, with Seth close behind.

As the twain advanced they could still hear the noisy savages, away to their left; but the sounds gradually receded and soon were heard no more.

"Who and what is that Mad Miner?" asked Seth, when they had gone perhaps a mile, and slackened their pace a little.

"Ye hev axed me a stunner!" declared Rock, in reply. "Thar am one thing sart'in as the nose on yer face, when ye tum'le down, head fu'stest with yer toes up; he saved our topknots ter-night."

"And he saved my brother's life and mine yesterday."

"Wal, I reckon. He's a tearer, though, and jess the coon fer fun. Jeems Stopple! he's got more raal fun in him than the hull o' Gold-dust Hollow! Why, he'll jess peel the winkers off yer peepers and ye won't see yerself fer the smoke!"

"But don't you know where he came from, or who he is?"

"Wal, ye wind me kerslap. He hain't been

in these byar diggin's long. He says he keems frum Spur's Pocket; but he's so stark, staring mad ye can't depend on him any more than ye can a windmill. But Temperance Tim says, and he won't lie for no galoot, that his name is Windham Gray, and that his dad was sum punkins down in Frisco, till a pack o' coyotes bu'sted him and Wind was druv to the mount'ins. The boy made a big strike thar, but a lot o' roughs knocked him down the crusher's shaft, and strikin' on his head they picked him up for dead. Howsum'dever, he didn't turn up his toes then, but he ain't been hisself since. Some galoot 'll pick him off soon mabbe, ef he don't dodge his head. But Rock Randel ain't the beaver to forget a favor, and he'll dig the funeral o' the first cuss es harms him."

"Very well," said Seth Harlow, harshly. "You may consider him in the light of a friend if you choose, but, though he has done me two good turns—saved my life twice—I consider him my mortal foe!"

"Sho! Ye don't think he is a spook?"

"Man or demon, he killed my brother!"

"That all?" exclaimed Rock in evident relief.

"All? Is not that enough?"

"Scuse me, old hoss; I meant to hev said sumthin' else! My tongue got twisted somehow. Hark! What was that?"

A wild, plaintive cry was borne to their ears; and succeeding it was heard a deep, hoarse voice evidently raised to its highest pitch, and repeating in regular succession the single word: "Gold!"

For a hundred times or more this sound rung the length and breadth of the valley, until every tree and rock seemed to take up the meaningless exclamation.

The two miners looked upon each other in wonder.

The Man-from-Texas fast yielding to his dread of the supernatural, began to tremble like an aspen.

Seth Harlow turned pale, and was paralyzed with dread at the awe-inspiring cries.

All at once they ceased, and a silence succeeded unbroken even by the creatures of the night.

Then, as if mocking the oppressive stillness, a strong wind came sweeping over the mountain range and went shrieking through the tree-tops.

Shaking off at last their dread the couple were about to move ahead, when Rock exclaimed, huskily:

"In mercy's name, look there!"

Seth Harlow suddenly saw a human form appear in the semi-darkness a few rods in front.

A moment it was seen in the weird starlight, and then it vanished.

Gone but a moment, judge of their dismay when it was again seen, and again went out of sight!

There was no mistaking the man's figure, and his white face shone in the night plainly.

Spellbound, the spectators looked on in silence.

At last Seth Harlow said:

"Do you keep a close lookout, and if there is any change apparent warn me, while I will solve that mystery if 'tis possible."

Clutching his revolvers nervously while he rigidly tried to stifle his fears, he slowly and cautiously approached the dreaded spot.

Yet the phantom-like form came and went as before!

CHAPTER IX.

WAS IT AN ABDUCTION?

"GOLD! gold! gold! gold!"

Once more the Hollow echoed with the sound of that single word.

Seth paused in his course.

Speechless the miners only listened and waited.

Soon the cry died away, and once more silence reigned throughout the valley.

"Let's git out o' this quicker!" gasped Rock, with chattering teeth. "The Hollow is chock-full o' spooks!"

"Wait a moment, Rock," whispered back Seth. "Do you see that form now?"

"Nary a chip, old hoss! Let's git. My top-knot feels queer!"

Before Seth could answer both were startled by the reappearance of the phantom form standing in midair!

"We ar' a goner!" shrieked The-Man-from-Texas, and he tried to spring up, when he fell headlong into the bushes.

As if frightened by the movement, the man shot swiftly back out of sight.

"Are you crazy, Rock Randel?" asked Harlow, sternly.

"Whar's that spook?"

"Gon— Hal! there it comes again!"

"Ain't ye afeerd—"

"Afraid? What have we to fear? I am going to know the meaning of that."

"Sho! Wal, ef ye are so plucky, all I hev to say is thet Rock Randel's a dog-goned fool!" exclaimed that worthy, overmastering his terror with a mighty effort. "Gi'n us yer paw, old beaver, and this 'coon won't squawk nary 'g'in. He'll foller ye like a tail to a comit!"

Without another word the twain crawled forward.

Again the phantom-like being darted before them and then fled.

Before it was repeated, however, they reached the spot, to discover a strange phenomenon.

Suspended from the top of a bending sapling and swayed back and forth by the strong wind was the lifeless form of a man!

The mystery was a mystery no longer. It had been seen only when the wind was blowing quite smart.

But how came the body there?

As their gaze became fixed upon it, while noting its pendulum-like movement, Seth uttered a cry of dismay, and exclaimed huskily:

"It is my brother!"

It was indeed the mortal remains of Charles Harlow!

Aided by the Texan, Seth cut the thongs that held it in the air, and laid the form upon the earth.

"We must not leave it exposed here," said he, anxiously. "I began to bury it yesterday, but through some mysterious means the body disappeared. Will you help me dig a grave?"

"Sart'in. It's mighty risky bizness, but Rock Randel ain't one to go back on a friend. Kem, I reckon we had better go back inter the valley further. It will be easier digging."

Bearing the body with them, they finally paused about midway in the valley, and but a few rods from where they had found the remains.

Selecting the most desirable places as regarded removing the earth, they commenced their laborious task.

At last, covered with perspiration they stopped.

"I guess that'll do," said The-Man-from-Texas.

They turned to get the body and place it in the pit, when to their amazement and consternation, though it had lain within a few feet, it was now missing.

Vividly to Seth's mind returned the event of the preceding day.

As he had searched, they wildly looked for the remains, and as before in vain!

"Tain't no use!" affirmed Rock. "I know'd it war a spook, and 'tain't no more use to shovel dirt on a pesky spook than 'tis to kiver up smoke with yer eyes shut!"

Puzzled and dumfounded, Seth could make no reply.

In the midst of his painful meditations Harlow chanced to look at the growth before them, and saw the bent sapling from which they had freed his brother's body. One glance, and he staggered back with a groan.

Rock saw all that he did and cried out with dismay.

Suspended from the tree as before, and still swinging to and fro in the night breeze, was the form of Charles Harlow!

At last The-Man-from-Texas found speech to say:

"Randel Rock! I am goin' to huff it! Git with me, or ye ar' a gone bufler!"

"It is my brother!" cried Seth, excitedly, and wild with grief he rushed forward to the spot. Rock saw him reach the place and throw up his hands to grasp the moving form, and then he saw him, in the same breath, stagger back and fall to the ground.

Not a sound had broken the night stillness.

Seth Harlow gave a few spasmodic struggles, and then his limbs straightened in the rigidity of death, and he lay perfectly motionless.

Paralyzed with fear Rock did not move for several moments. But at last, shaking off the spell, he bounded away, with one lingering look over his shoulder, and he did not pause until the fatal spot was left far behind.

Though he met with no further adventures, Rock did not reach Silverstone until toward morning.

A few were astir, and from them he learned that Conrad Burke had spread the story that his expedition had proved a disastrous failure. In fact, that all had perished save himself.

Thus the Texan was greeted with surprise. Ay, more! He saw that Burke's story had created considerable ill-feeling toward him, and that many who had heretofore professed friendship now met him coldly.

However, he heeded it as little as possible, and

told to the amazed listeners the scene he had witnessed in the valley.

Though no one openly denied his report, 'twas plain many disbelieved it.

"A likely tale to come to us with!" sneered Burke. "It seems you are a coward as well as fool, Rock Randel, from your own words."

How the Texan would have received this insulting speech is easy to imagine, had not something of more startling interest demanded the attention of all.

Puffing and panting for breath, the postmaster joined the throng, with the astounding declaration that Lenore Cassa had left his house and was nowhere to be found.

"She was with us last evening," explained Cotton, "but she ain't to be found this morning."

"Them pesky red varmints hev toted her off!" declared Randel, boldly, as the crowd listened to the speaker's words in silence.

"Don't be too fast, Man-from-Texas," broke in Burke. "Remember, you don't know any more than the rest of us. I'll bet she left of her own free will, and was there only as a decoy to bring us trouble!"

Rock strode fiercely away toward the post-office, without seeming to notice the other.

Nearly all the "city" centered at Temperance Tim's, and for a time great confusion and excitement existed.

After a thorough examination, it was given up that no evidence of an abduction could be found, and that Lenore Cassa had left of her own free will.

A few there were, however, who would not accept this for granted.

Among them was honest Temperance Tim and The-Man-from-Texas.

"I'll bet my top-knot ag'in' that plug hat o' yours, Cooney Burke, thet Miss Lenore was stole away by Buck Warner or sum o' his coyotes," declared the Texan.

"Of course you are welcome to your good opinion of your judgment. If you are sure that is the case, why don't you institute a search for her and save her from such a wretch?"

"If I don't, ye may call Rock Randel meaner nor a digger Injun!"

Rock was in earnest.

Mark Hanson, who had been hired by Rock to superintend the working of the mine, was called one side by the Texan.

"Look hyar," said the latter, grasping the hairy overseer's hand. "That gal is in peril, and Rock Randel ain't one to desert her. Ye jess keep things straight at the pits till I kem back."

"I will try it," replied the other, but adding frankly—"I fear there is trouble ahead. That Burke is doing all he can to set the men against you."

"I will cook his hash 'fore long, or he shall mine!" gritted Rock. "Do the best ye can, Mark, and I'll see that ye don't lose by it."

The day passed, and still another, and yet Rock Randel was not seen.

He had said himself that he was on a "blind trail," and there were many who believed he had left the valley forever.

In the evening of the second day the Bang-up was crowded with loafers.

"You lie, Rock Randel!" were words that suddenly hushed the hubbub of the place.

CHAPTER X.

A DUEL IN THE DARK.

APART from the main crowd was an excited group.

Rock Randel had suddenly "put in an appearance."

"W'ot's the word?" asked an old weather-beaten miner. "Can't ye find enny trace o' the girl?"

The Texan shook his head.

"I expected no more," avowed Cooney Burke, who came forward at this juncture. "The whole thing is a sell, and it has proved a pretty dear one, too."

"Look hyar, Coon Burke!" cried Rock, excitedly. "I reckon I know beaver from 'possum! and I tell ye thet gal war no sneakin' coyote! She jess talked biz'ness. That ar' cuss o' Buck Warner is bound to drive every honest person out o' Gold-dust Hollow, but jess let me set my peepers on him ag'in, and I'll dig his funeral quicker'n scat!"

"Bah! you try to heap upon Gold-dust Buck just what you are doing yourself. I say again in presence of these gentlemen your whole conduct bears the stamp of fraud. Of course I care nothing what is done, I have no share here, and to-morrow shall quit the valley, but I speak for those around me."

Trembling violently, Rock replied:

"Ye ar' meaner than a p'izen snake in sunshine! and I'll bet my bottom dollar ye ar' chipped with Gold-dust Buck, Coon Burke!"

"You lie, Rock Randel!" yelled the other, fiercely.

"Ketch me, quick! or I'll dig the varmint's funeral!" shrieked Rock, hoarse with passion.

"You are a coward," sneered Burke, "and you dare not meet me like a man!"

"D'ye hyar that?" roared The-Man-from-Texas, when, like a flash his revolvers gleamed in the air, and Burke drawing his as quickly, the crowd fell back with yells of terror, leaving the foes face to face.

"Hold!" commanded the clear voice of Mark Hanson, "rushing to the spot in season to avoid the expected collision. "If you must fight let there be no foul play, but meet as men."

"He is checked—the dog!" gritted the Texan. "Rock Randel don't play greaser fer any galoot!"

"All I ask is for the sneak to face me like a man," howled Burke, doggedly.

"I am jess the beaver to spot yer trail!" roared the enraged Randel. "I'll meet ye ten paces ter-morrer mornin', and one o' us shall ride in a funeral."

"Why wait till to-morrow morning?" asked the other, quickly. "I suppose you would like time to levant but I challenge you to fight me with your revolvers to-night—here in this room—alone—in the dark!"

The crowd was awed by the cool, determined words.

"Bravo for you, Coon Burke!" cried one of

the throng, and others echoed similar encouragement.

"That coyote don't live es says Rock Randel is afeer'd o' any critter this side o' Texas, much more sich a mule-eared gopher es ye, Coon Burke!"

"Enough said," exclaimed the cool sharp. "Let preparations be made for the duel. Clear the room at once."

It was soon arranged that the combatants should each be armed with their revolvers and a knife each. Then once left alone in the room they might fight it out as suited themselves.

Accordingly the crowd hastily departed and soon only the duelists, Hanson and one other was left in the apartment.

These last satisfied themselves there was nothing wrong in the arrangement, that the antagonists' firearms were loaded alike and that they had no weapons concealed about their persons.

This done the lights were blown out and the seconds joined the crowd outside, closing and securing the door so that no one might go to the aid of either.

The duelists were alone in the pitchy dark standing on opposite sides of the room and each facing the place where he supposed his foe to be waiting.

Outside the crowd listened anxiously for the first round of battle.

A moment's silence fell upon the scene within, broken at last by a low whistle.

Rock started. The time for action had come. He fancied he could see the outlines of his foe across the room, when quick as thought he discharged one chamber of his revolver, springing noiselessly one side as he did so.

A sharp cry followed and then a bullet just grazed his forehead.

Hurried tramp of footsteps succeeded and the room seemed filled with men.

The-Man-from-Texas felt that some trap had been sprung upon him, but fearless as ever he rushed into the melee like an infuriated tiger.

Those without heard the wildest cries, shots and groans, and curses, and still the mad fight went on.

Rock sprung into the center of the apartment, and firing at random into the horde of men he felt was in front, he heard one fall to the floor.

The next instant he closed in hand-to-hand combat, fighting whom he could not tell, but at least half a dozen armed men.

Twice Rock felt himself wounded, and still he maintained the unequal contest.

He had emptied the chambers of one revolver, and the other would soon be useless.

Again the dull thud of a falling body was heard, and a fearful death-cry rung through the building. Another of the assailants was gone.

"Curse the Texan!" roared the voice of Cooney Burke; "take that!" and Rock received a fearful blow on the head.

By a fortunate movement, however, he partly parried the stroke and closed with his antagonist. But his revolver had been knocked from his grasp, and his sole defense now was his knife.

Those around tried to join in the battle, but

for their lives they couldn't tell friend from foe. Then suddenly another fell to the floor as if dead.

Heavens! Some one was in their midst striking terror and death among them.

In a flash still another gave his last cry and dropped to the floor.

Only one was left, and he found himself in the fatal embrace of his unknown, invisible foe.

In the meanwhile Rock and his adversary were doing their level best.

Conrad Burke was a powerful man, and the two were evenly matched.

Randel felt the other's iron grip clutch him by the throat, and he suddenly grew weak and faint.

Tighter and tighter pressed the vise-like hold, till it seemed to take away the Texan's breath.

He seized the hand by the wrist and tried to wrench it off.

In vain.

Burke had seized his right hand, and was trying to gain possession of the knife.

Ha! the other had dropped his!

Quick as a flash Rock, with his left hand, seized the knife from the other and struck furiously at his antagonist's side.

Burke gave a sudden wrench upon his neck, or the blow must have proved fatal. As it was, the warm blood gushed out in a torrent.

In the movement The-Man-from-Texas stumbled, and taking quick advantage of the mishap, Burke hurled him backward.

"Quick, men!" he cried. "I have him!"

In response he was himself thrown fiercely upon the floor.

Quickly gaining his feet, Rock bent over him; and ere the fallen man could prevent it, he seized him in turn by the throat, and planted his knee on his breast, while he raised his arm to deal the final blow, crying, excitedly:

"Coyote, die!"

"Don't!" gasped the stricken one. "I give up. You have defeated me, and I'm satisfied."

"Good! I don't keer to strike a fallen man."

All other fighting in the room had ceased.

Feeling that the duel had ended, the anxious crowd soon burst open the door and rushed in.

When the lights once more lit the apartment what an awful tableau greeted their eyes.

Rock and Burke were completely covered with blood, and looked more like wild beasts than men.

"Thar!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, releasing his conquered foe, "I hope ye hev got enough of Rock Randel."

Crestfallen Cooney Burke arose without a word.

"What means this?" cried Hanson, as he discovered the other bodies lying upon the floor.

"Thar war treachery afoot, and the mean cusses 'tended to rub me out. But thar war too menny for 'em!"

There were the bodies of five men—all dead!

"That coyote had 'em hid behind the counter so's to hev an easy job," declared Randel. "But I could give my word thet I hed somebody to help me. Where is he?"

No trace of such a person was found.

One of the slain five had been shot; the others bore the wounds of a knife.

Rock had killed the first. Who had overpowered the rest!

Amazed the spectators gazed on the scene in silence.

"Curses upon you, Rock Randel!" suddenly cried the sharp voice of Cooney Burke, who stood in the doorway, shaking his fists at The-Man-from-Texas, fiercely; "you have foiled me this time, but by the Golden Cave! you shall die for this night's work!"

Before the awed crowd could move he darted away and disappeared.

CHAPTER XI.

DANDY DEFIANT.

THOUGH Rock had received several wounds, none of them were serious, and he had come out of the duel "first best" after all.

The bodies of the slain were removed, when all were recognized as men belonging to Silverstone.

The dead had friends there, who, though really they could not blame the Texan, yet they turned their indignation upon him.

What was more disastrous to Rock, he began to be satisfied in his own mind that at least one-half, if not more of the miners were in sympathy with Buck Warner!

He knew the crisis could not be far away.

"By Randel Rock!" he said to himself, as he hurried down to Tim Cotton's that evening. "I reckon this 'coon don't pass in his checks without a funeral. He—"

The appearance of Wild Wind put an end to his meditations.

"Te-he!" laughed the lunatic. "Man-from-Texas no find gal?"

"Nary a once!"

"She gone! Wild Wind see bad-eyed man with dark face take her down Silverstone."

"Can ye tell me whar she ar' now?" asked Rock, eagerly.

The Mad Miner shook his head.

"Told all! Texas man better not go down. Wild Wind see smooth-faced man and one, two, three more going to kill him. They hide in dark, but shoot quick—*quick!*"

The strange being who had scarcely paused while speaking, darted away when he finished.

Completely mystified, Rock hardly knew how to proceed, but on the alert from this warning he took the middle of the street and kept on.

The-Man-from-Texas was in just that frame of mind to be reckless.

"By my right hand!" he exclaimed aloud, "I've played the 'possum long enough! Rock, old boy, ye—"

His quick eye had caught sight of some one hiding in the shadow of a building across the way.

Then a sharp report broke the stillness, and a bullet just grazed his temple.

He had barely sprung to the opposite side of the street when a volley of shot flew past the spot where he had stood.

"That fixed him!" cried a quick voice, "I saw him fall. But let's make a sure thing of him," and followed by the others, the speaker rushed forward and came into full sight.

In an instant Rock raised his revolver, and three reports followed in rapid succession.

With howls of pain and terror the waylayers fled.

"Guess ye got all ye axed fer then," said Rock with a grin, as he resumed his journey to the post-office.

That night The-Man-from-Texas had a long talk with Temperance Tim, the main point of which was that the latter advised him to leave the valley.

"They are all against you," he said; "they hate you because you own all the valley. Buck Warner has a big control. Coon Burke is working for him, and I think Mark Hanson is in league with him. Now the Harlow brothers are dead and Alpine Luke, too, who is there you can rely upon to assist you?"

Rock was silent for several moments. At last he said:

"I chip with you. Es ye say, there ain't one in Silverstone I can depend on, save ye. But, Tim, all I hev in this world is hyar in this mine, and afore I'll leave it alive, I'll dig the funeral o' every coyote this side o' Silver Mountain!"

"I hope the right will triumph," averred the postmaster, earnestly. "At any rate you can count on me for anything I can do for you."

"Gi'n us yer paw, old beaver; this coon won't ferget his pardners!"

Another sun shed its light o'er Gold-dust Hollow.

Early in the morning Rock left the post-office to go to the Bang-up, to see to the arrangements for the day. He wished, too, to learn the tenor of his miners' feelings in regard to the affair of the past evening. If he considered it prudent he wished to prospect the "Cave lead" as the upper section of the valley was called.

He was surprised to find a large crowd gathered around the "hotel."

"What's in the wind now?" he asked of one of the bystanders, unable to see what was going on in the center of the mass of lookers-on.

"Thet ar' Mad Miner has been on sum sort av a rampage and the boys are goin' to rope him, I guess," replied the other carelessly.

"What has he done that he deserves a funeral?"

"Dunno. Mebbe— Sol Ginger! there he goes! Hooray for the Mex'can lion!" and the excited speaker turned to watch the movements of the crowd in front.

In an instant the throng took up the cry, till the air rung with the hoarse shout.

Rock suddenly saw a mule led into the opening in the midst of the mob, and Wild Wind, with his hands bound behind him, thrown upon its back.

This was beneath a tree in front of the Bang-up, and a rope was quickly tossed over a limb, while eager hands began to secure one end around the doomed man's neck, and others to fasten the opposite end to the tree-branch above.

All this took but an instant.

The Man-from-Texas could stand no more.

Elbowing his way through the excited horde of lookers-on in mad haste, he reached the spot.

"Hyar!" he yelled, "what does this mean?"

The executioners paused and looked at the intruder in amazement.

"What has Wind Gray done thet ye treat him in this way?" Rock demanded.

"How kems thet to consarn you, Mister Randel?" asked one, Oregon Dick, who seemed the leader of the movement.

"I want to see fair play, that is all. Hes he been up to mischief?"

"Wal, I should say so. He shot Bill Thorne down by Harkman's, last evening, and wounded Joe Sumner at the same time. We heerd the firing at the Bang-up, and we captured the cuss jess as he war trying to levant."

Rock comprehended the situation in a moment. Wild Wind had been taken for what he had done when attacked by the waylayers on going from the saloon to Cotton's.

"Look hyar, boys," he said, "ye hev made a mistake. 'Twar me who must hev dug Bill's funeral. I war 'tacked by a lot o' chaps last night, and did sum shooting."

Without heeding him the mad lynchers kept on with their purpose.

"D'ye hyar?" roared Rock. "I tell ye Wild Wind didn't wipe out Bill Thorne, and ye ain't no beaver to swing him fer it."

"You are a fool, Dick Lane, to let that Texan poke his fist into your dish. Better rope him, too!" hissed a voice from the crowd.

"I will ef he don't keep quiet. Up with the fool as quick as possible, boys."

Rock was getting furious.

"All I ask is fair play and no side-show," he cried. "Ef Wind Gray desarves hangin', then I am willin' he sh'u'd swing. But I tell ye he ain't corraled enny one. I shot Bill Thorne."

"Then of course you are willing to take the fool's place," said Oregon Dick. "Boys, it's a good snap. Secure him, and we won't lose any of our fun, after all!"

Rock drew his revolvers.

"Jess try it ef ye want to!" he declared in an ominous tone. "I am jess the 'coon fer a funeral. I rubbed out Bill Thorne, but I did it in self-defense. Wind Gray is innocent, and, by Randel Rock, he don't swing fer it!"

Oregon Dick fairly foamed with rage.

"Furies!" he yelled, "are we to be balked by that Texan dog? Up with the loony, men, quick!"

"Try it ef ye dare!" and with a revolver in either hand The-Man-from-Texas defied the mad mob.

CHAPTER XII.

AT BAY.

OREGON DICK saw that to press the matter further was sure to end in bloodshed.

His followers shrunk back in dismay.

Several moments passed before any one broke the stillness.

Then Mark Hanson came forward, saying in a compromising tone:

"Perhaps we have been rather fast, boys. It seems as if the fool did not do the deed after all."

"I second the words of Mr. Hanson," said Tim Cotton, who had just joined the group. "Rock Randel carries a level head, and he ain't one to upset any one's dish unless he sees the poison."

"Let him put down 'em shooters, then," exclaimed Oregon Dick, sulkily.

"Not till I see Wind Gray taken off the

mule," replied the daring Texan. "I ain't goin' to see that boy thrown cold fer nothin'."

"What say you, men?" said Hanson at this opportune time. "Shall Wild Wind be hung for what he never did, or shall he levant?"

"Let him git!" some one cried, and others took up the declaration till it seemed the unanimous opinion.

"Just as you'll hev it!" growled Oregon Dick, doggedly. "I should say rope him and the Texan too, then we might hev peace. Do ye hear, Wind Gray, ef ye show yer ugly mug in Silverstone again, I wouldn't give a cent a bushel for them. Let him go, boys."

The Mad Miner was soon at liberty, and receiving a parting injunction not to appear in Silverstone again, he was allowed to depart in peace, and Dandy Rock restored his weapons to their position in his belt with the satisfaction of knowing he had gained his object.

Though he had made his foes more bitter against him, The-Man-from-Texas had gained a number of new friends by his noble bravery.

"I tell ye thet Texan is no Injun," affirmed a tall miner to a knot of listeners: "he's true grit and no blow-up. I hed ruther he'd be my pardner than to hev him ag'in' me. He means bizness, and he'll jess throw every chap es tries to push him. I fer one am jess the old chap to let him run this lead to suit hisself."

The speaker was not alone in his avowal, and that day Rock's prospects brightened.

"Carry a steady hand and you will sweep the board yet," declared Mark, confidently, to Randel, as they saw the miners commence their work with better spirits than they had done for a long time.

"I am pesky narvous about that girl," said the Texan. "I hate to know sich a purty one is in trouble. *Sumthin'* must be done."

"You are right, Rock. I am with you every time. We must not delay longer than till to-night. But we must leave here now."

"No; but we must go there."

With a lighter heart than common, Rock moved among his men, cheering them with jovial words and laughter-provoking stories.

Thus the forenoon wore auspiciously away.

Not far from noon, as the miners were busily at work, the *spang* of a rifle suddenly availed the valley, and with a cry of pain one of their number dropped his pick-ax and fell to the ground—dead!

Confusion followed.

They were at work under the frowning heights of Silver Mountain, and the shot seemed to have come from the mountain-side.

Seizing their firearms in haste they sought cover, expecting an attack from an ambushed foe. But as no other shots followed, they finally left the diggings, and a squad was sent out to find the murderer if possible.

After a fruitless search they returned.

This sad affair cast a gloom over the minds of the miners.

Who had done the deed?

The victim was one of the most respected men in Silverstone.

Oregon Dick shook his head and nodded toward Rock Randel.

Cooney Burke, who still seemed determined to

stick to the mine, began to throw out dark hints against the Texan.

Neither was Rock unconscious of the new storm gathering, though he kept about his business as ever.

Toward night the miners were again startled by the report of a rifle, and to their dismay another of their number was slain.

This time the shot certainly came from the mountain.

Every one glancing hastily up they discovered nearly hidden behind a clump of bushes, the form of a man, holding in his hand the smoking rifle with which he had just committed the murder.

"Wild Wind, the Mad Miner!" cried two-score of voices, as the garb and long hair and beard of the witless unknown was recognized.

In less than a minute every miner sprung up, and rushed to capture the wretch.

Quick as they were, when they reached the place he had vanished; and though they scoured the mountain-side they could find nothing of him.

Baffled again, deep were the threats uttered against the strange miner.

"And this all comes of that Rock Randel!" cried Oregon Dick. "He saved that fool on purpose to rub us out!"

"Where is the Texan, now?" asked Burke.

Rock was nowhere to be seen.

"Don't that show he is guilty, when he has dusted like the coward he is?"

"Rock had to return to Silverstone an hour since," said Mark Hanson.

"Jess—so! but I kinder guess it would plague ye to find him thar!"

"Let's find him, I say, and rope him. It all comes of him that Matt and Pike have been killed to-day. I'll bet he hired the fool to do it."

Burke was bold enough to venture the speech, and it proved like a spark of fire in a pile of combustible matter.

Oregon Dick echoed the demand; others repeated the cry; and at least one-half of those present started for Silverstone with the avowed purpose of hunting down Rock Randel.

Reaching the city they were told he had gone to the Bang-up.

Hither they rushed.

Wondering what was coming, The-Man-from-Texas met them at the door.

"Corral him!" shouted the leader.

"Rock Randel, we have come to take you, dead or alive!"

"Sho!" exclaimed the imperturbable Man-from-Texas, once more drawing those ever-ready revolvers.

The throng came to a standstill.

"What's up, old coon?" asked Rock. "Ye look kind o' frustrated!"

"Pike Daniels has been shot, and we caught that Crazy Miner a-doin' it!"

"Wal, why didn't ye corral him? Seems to me, mule-eared gophers—"

"Bah! the fool escaped. But 'tis you we want!"

"Wal, hyar I am! Jess sp'ilin' fer fun, too!"

"Then you surrender?"

"When I ride in my own funeral—not till then."

Oregon Dick shook with rage. Finally he said in a tone that showed he was in earnest:

"Rock Randel, we are not fooling with you. This is no time for boys' play. We have tried to run this mine long enough. We have stood all we are a-going to. You must either levant, or we will hang you from this tree within an hour!"

It was several moments before Rock attempted any reply. At last he spoke:

"As you say, Oregon Dick, this is no time for boys' play. But you are madmen to think I will grant what you ask. D'ye think I am a sneakin' coyote? This valley is rightfully mine. 'Tis all I hev in this world, and before I would give it to you and your followers, I would a hundred times give up my life if it were possible! Hark!" as the mob began to move uneasily, "I hev' not sought for this quarrel, but you hev' drove me to it. I hev' never hurt enny of ye, but from this hour I am a foe to every man who refuses me my own. D'ye hyar?"

"Then you refuse to leave Gold-Dust Hollow?" exclaimed Lane, in amazement.

"I do!" he answered, tersely. Turning to the excited lookers-on, he continued: "You all know for what I am hunted like a coyote, and how many of ye are men enough to help Rock Randel defend his own?"

Rock was aroused.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUNTED DOWN.

No answer came to Rock's request, unless the awed silence which told that no one there was bold enough to express friendship for him could be considered such.

"Wal, I spot ther trail," said Randel, after the pause had become painful, "I am alone."

Then reaching inside the door he grasped his rifle that had been leaning against the partition.

"Of course ye will be too menny for me in the end, but es long es my eyes can look through the hindsight o' my rifle will I send death among ye, and my spook when I am gone shall haunt Gold-Dust Hollow till every coyote has gone to his funeral! If I can't keep this mine I can fight fer it! I hev spotted ye all, and 'tis the best coon who will corral ther dust."

Shouldering his rifle as coolly as if going on a pleasure-hunt, Rock strode away.

No one had the will to attempt to molest him then. His calm bravery had unmanned them.

Never once turning back, The-Man-from-Texas kept rapidly on.

The crowd had scarcely seen him disappear around a street corner, when the report of a rifle was heard, and quickly following it a shrill cry of distress.

Knowing what to expect, the bystanders rushed swiftly to the place, and reached it in season to see Randel dart around the adjacent buildings.

"Good Lord!" gasped Oregon Dick; "he has shot Conrad Burke!"

"Yes, I am done for!" moaned that individual. "I met him here, and he shot me like a dog!"

The speaker tried to articulate further, but

with the effort his throat filled, and a moment later he drew his last breath.

"Boys," cried Dick Lane, "can you look on that and let that desperado escape without making a move to capture him?"

"Corral the Texan!"

"Hunt him down!"

"Rope him!"

Such were the cries taken up by the infuriated lookers-on.

With the one from Oregon at their head the mob rushed in pursuit of the flying fugitive.

"Jeems Stopple-ter-Hopper!" ejaculated Rock, as he heard the throng close upon his heels, "kem on, ye screeching coyotes; thar's fun ahead, and ef this coon don't git his hat full, it be because he can't huff it!"

It soon became evident that the race would prove a stern one.

The only course for Rock was up the valley, which above Silverstone gradually grew narrower, until it was little more than a defile leading up the mountain-side.

Hemmed in by the precipitous hights hanging over it on either side, there was no escape, right or left.

The sun was less than an hour high, but he could hardly hope to elude his foes till night. Ay, he was tempted to turn and sell his life as dearly as possible. But still he kept on.

On and on along the rugged way sped the fleet-footed Texan, while close behind followed the wild throng.

As yet not a shot had been fired, but as Rock came upon a slight eminence, and thus exposed his person, a volley of bullets whistled round his head, more than one grazing his flesh.

"Fire away yer flint-locks!" he yelled. "Who keers?"

He made a discovery the next moment, however, that made his hope sink.

Ahead was a considerable ridge of land crossing the valley, and which lay directly in his course.

To pass over it was to put himself in plain sight of his foes, and in dangerous rifle range.

To go around was to tack on his course, and that would give his foes an easy victory in the race.

For a moment he almost hesitated to keep on.

Then his quick eye saw what he fancied might be a way to escape, and perhaps baffle effectually his enemy.

The surface of the ground was growing more broken as he advanced, though it was covered with a heavy growth.

Bounding swiftly forward, he soon neared the dreaded place.

A wild shout from his pursuers told that they saw the advantage soon to be theirs.

Near the foot of the ridge was a huge tree, with branches growing nearly to the ground.

Quickly dodging into the range of it, he bounded forward with renewed speed to run the perilous gantlet.

The foes behind shouted anew, and the race became more exciting.

As Rock almost gained the summit, another volley of shot came tearing through the growth.

The most of them flew wide of their mark.

but one, better aimed than the rest, struck him in the foot.

In an instant the blood began to fill his boot, and he felt the most acute pain.

Still he could only keep on.

The next moment he dashed over the top of the rise and began to descend on the other side.

But as he looked up at the sharp ascent ahead, and knew that sooner or later he would be stopped by the unsurmountable mountain, he grew sick at heart.

Right and left he looked in vain for some protection, or way of escape.

His ankle was growing stiff and his foot so sore that he could not step without intense suffering.

Nearer, still nearer, approached the mad horde of pursuers.

Inch by inch he was now losing ground.

Still on and on! Now, up—up!

A part of the pursuers had fallen far behind in the race, and perhaps given up altogether. But Oregon Dick and half a dozen others were laboring might and main to overtake him.

Their rifles were empty now, and they had no time to reload them.

Rock turned to look back to see how near they were, when he caught his foot in a bush and was thrown headlong to the earth.

The chasers gave a yell of triumph as they saw him fall, and with renewed power sprung still more swiftly forward.

Rock saw the folly of running further.

He was down—at bay—but not conquered!

Quickly arising on one knee he brought his unerring rifle to his shoulder, and as its sharp bang rung on the air the death-cry of the foremost pursuer followed.

Again the weapon's startling report awoke the valley, and again the victim's dying shrieks blended with it.

With rapid movements Rock began to reload. Once more he leveled it, and this time at the leader.

But he wisely held his fire. With an empty rifle he was at the mercy of the gang.

He saw that those to the rear would soon be in front.

Thus he regained his feet, and holding the weapon still menacingly, he retreated at right-angles.

He had caught sight of what appeared the entrance to a cavern in the side of the mountain.

It would at least afford him protection from their fire and as his only hope he tried to reach it.

The pursuers again rushed on *en masse*.

Before they divined Rock's intentions, however, he had gained the cave, and with a triumphant shout disappeared into its mouth.

Completely exhausted The-Man-from-Texas fell at full length upon the rocky surface.

The repeated cuts of the mob outside aroused him, and he looked about for his means of defense.

He saw at a glance that the cavern did not extend more than eight or ten feet in depth, and that he was surrounded by a solid wall of granite!

Behind the angle of the wall near the entrance he could get partial protection from the fire of

those outside. But how long could he keep them at bay?

At a safe distance Oregon Dick and his followers formed a circle around the cave.

"He can't escape," said the leader, exultantly. "There is no other exit to the place and if we can't do any better we can starve him out."

Sunlight soon died out and night settled over hill and valley.

Rock, after bandaging his wound as best he could, commenced his lonely vigil, and crouching close against the ledge, with rifle in hand, was ever ready for an attack from the two-score of men thirsting for his blood.

Thus darkness wore on apace.

CHAPTER XIV.

"OUT OF THE LION'S PAWS INTO HIS JAWS."

THE moon at last disappeared behind the mountain crest, and the stars became hidden by great, inky-black clouds that soon shrouded the sky, so that Gold-dust Hollow was a scene of darkness.

Still the sentinel watchers lay in wait for their prey.

In silence, with dread forebodings hanging over him, The-Man-from-Texas peered cautiously out of his retreat, arms in hand.

Thus hour after hour wore on, bringing him no relief.

Vigilant and determined, Oregon Dick and his followers stood at their posts.

Then in the midst of their lonely vigil terror cowed their spirits and rendered them almost powerless.

One of their number, standing in a little group around one of their fires, suddenly fell, stricken with instant death.

When his companions saw him lay perfectly motionless, and discovered that he was lifeless, they gazed around in dismay.

From the dead man's breast was protruding a huge knife. Only that, but enough to tell a fearful tale.

A few of the bravest scoured the surrounding forest, and even while they were doing it another victim fell at the other fire.

Thinking to escape their unseen foe in the darkness, they hastily retreated from the light of the blaze.

Five minutes passed, and they began to breathe easier.

It was but a transient gleam of hope.

Again a victim fell; this time with a cry of pain, but with the same fatal weapon!

Terror turned to horror.

Should they flee like cowards or brave it out?

Oregon Dick was the leading spirit, and declared boldly that they must hunt down the slayer, and must not leave the valley.

He infused new courage into the cowering wretches.

In the midst of the renewed search, the fourth miner fell as mysteriously as the others.

The survivors could stand no more.

With no further thought for the Texan hunted down, they turned and fled for Silverstone, Oregon Dick hesitating no longer to keep them company.

Unconscious of all this, Rock lay in his cave, and maintained his wearisome watch.

He saw the light from the fires grow down, and wondered what it meant.

Still lower burned the flames, until the last fagot was consumed, and nothing dispelled the darkness of the night.

Not knowing what it meant, The-Man-from-Texas dared not leave his concealment.

At last he muttered:

"It's mighty risky, but I am goin' to try it. Ef the pesky varmints ain't left the valley, I mought es well hev a scrimmage now es enny time; and ef I can't escape in this hyar darkness, I never can."

Crawling cautiously forward, he emerged from his hiding-place.

No one seemed aroused.

He listened.

To his ears was borne from a spot near at hand the cry of a night-bird.

"They are gone!" he said to himself, "or that critter wouldn't be so noisy. But I must keep my peepers opened, though I can't see but pesky little in this hyar darkness. Howsumdever, it's jess the thing fer me. Hyar! es I live, the clouds are lifting, and the wind will blow the storm over. Wagh!"

Exercising the utmost caution, Rock slowly advanced, until at last, unmolested, he gained the bottom of the valley.

Pausing under a clump of bushes, he was trying to decide the course best for him to pursue, when he fancied he heard footsteps approaching.

Crouching further back into the shadow of the place, he soon saw two men coming near.

In spite of the darkness, he recognized them as Gold-dust Buck and Evil Eyes the half-breed.

With his first impulse, he half-raised his rifle, but with second thought turned to watch the twain.

Unconscious of his presence, they passed carelessly by, and he was about to follow on their trail, when he heard another coming on their course.

Sinking back, Rock was surprised to see the Mad Miner come into sight.

It did not take a second glance to see that Wild Wind was tracking the others.

Wondering what was up, he too fell in the line behind the latter, and kept cautiously after the strange tracker.

Away down the valley the four men acting so singular a part kept steadily on.

After a while The-Man-from-Texas saw the lunatic pause, and creeping a little nearer, he found that Warner and the half-breed had come to a standstill.

They were now in the center of the valley, and Rock quickly discovered that they were near the spot where Harlow had been killed.

"Jeems Stopple-ter-Hopper!" he thought under his breath, as he began to tremble. "I'm might afeerd I'm a goner! I jess hope 'em spooks won't be tearin' round loose!"

Further speculation was stopped by the action of those in front; and then he heard a low whistle from the lips of Gold-dust Buck.

At the same moment he discovered a dark form lying under one of the larger trees ahead.

He recognized the spot in a moment as that

where Seth had fallen; and instinctively he glanced upward expecting to behold his brother dangling from above.

To his relief, however, the body was not to be seen; but as his gaze turned back to the other he fancied he saw him move.

"Hist!" came from Warner, causing the Texan to suddenly look at his foes.

"Where is she?" demanded Buck, in a low tone.

"I didn't dare to start with her until you came," was the reply, given by a third person who had appeared with the others, and whose voice Rock recognized as that of Flying Ned! The bushes cut off his view so that he could not see the speaker.

"All right," answered Warner; "we will get her now and be off at once. Ha, Ned! we have no more to fear from that Texan dog!"

"Good!" came the reply, and the three outlaws moved on.

"Rock, in following suit, found to his surprise that the Mad Miner had disappeared—vanished, as it seemed to him, from sight!

"Mercy! what's that?" cried Gold-dust Buck, as he entered the opening where Rock had seen the body of one of the dead Harlows.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he bent over the figure, "'tis that Charles Harlow. He ran his race quick," and giving the form a kick he kept ahead.

Rock gritted his teeth as he witnessed the inhuman act, but keeping his attention on those in front, soon reached the ill-fated spot.

Under the influence of dreadful apprehensions he shuddered with terror, and his gaze glancing upward, judge of his consternation when he saw that the body of the murdered man had suddenly appeared suspended in midair, and swaying to and fro as the wind moved the trees, presented a terrible sight!

Brave as The-Man-from-Texas was, the spectacle felled him to the earth as powerless as if stricken by a blow from a war-club.

As he fell, his terror found vent in a startling cry.

When he came to his senses, Rock was a helpless prisoner, while over him, their vicious faces gleaming with triumph, exulted Buck Warner and his confederates.

Notwithstanding his new peril, Randel turned first to look for the awful sight which had thrown him into the hands of his foe.

He breathed easier when he saw that it was gone.

"Ha-ha, boys!" laughed the desperado leader, "Oregon Dick said he had wiped out the Texan dog, but it seems he left it to us, after all. We are in luck, and now let's see if we can make such a blunder as bungling Dick Lane did!"

CHAPTER XV.

"LOST!"

THOUGH it was lighter than it had been it was so dark in the valley that nothing could be seen plainly.

"Shall we rid the world of the long-haired Texan?" asked Evil Eyes, as his small glittering orbs of vision fairly glistened with joy.

"Have you rope with you to hang him?" was Warner's reply,

Upon receiving a negative reply he said:

"It will not do for us to shoot him, as we don't know who we may arouse."

"Me fix him with my knife," declared the half-breed eagerly.

"All right, Evil Eyes," answered the leader. While you are about it I will hasten to the cave and get the girl."

With the words Buck Warner hastened away, glad to escape the cold-blooded deed, brute that he was.

"Ugh! me fix him!" exclaimed the chief to Flying Ned as soon as the other had left.

"Yes; but, hang it; why couldn't he 'a' staid and seen the thing through?"

"He squaw! no brave! Evil Eyes no 'fraid! Killee him quick. Lead him, long-hair, out of shade so me see sure."

Flying Ned holding Rock by the arm was in the act of obeying the chief's order when a quick footstep was heard behind.

Frightened, he turned just in season to receive a stunning blow between the eyes.

With a groan he staggered back, releasing his clutch.

Evil Eyes had barely time to give a grunt of surprise when he shared the same fate.

Then the terrible twain chancing to glance upward for the first time saw to their amazement the form of a man right over their heads.

At the same moment another appeared in front, when, thinking they were surrounded they sought safety in flight.

Without a word the new-comer whipped out a knife and severed the thongs that bound Rock.

"Bob Cracklesnapper!" cried Rock, as he found himself free, "gi'n us yer paw, old 'coon—"

"Hist!" admonished the other, "you may bring the whole lot of villains upon us! Are you hurt?"

"No," replied The-Man-from-Texas, accepting the caution; "but who are ye?"

"Don't you know Wild Wind?"

"Gosh!"

It was the Mad Miner.

"Come, quick!" he whispered; "we want to find him Gold-dust Sharp," and closely followed by Rock he hurried after Warner.

After going a short distance, however, he paused.

"I have lost him," he said.

"Jeems Stopple! we can't spot ther trail in this hyar darkness!"

"Can you give any idea of the course he has gone?"

"Nary a chip! Ar' ye arter the gal, Miss Lenore?"

"Yes; I overheard Warner say he was going after her. I think he has her secreted in a cave above here, and intends to remove her somewhere else."

"Jess so, I reckon. Gi'n us the lead and hyar's the 'coon es will chip in quick!"

"Good! I have others above here who are waiting for me, and I guess we had better go to them."

Wondering who they could be, Rock kept by his companion in silence.

Seeming perfectly familiar with the land, the lunatic advanced at a pace that puzzled The-Man-from-Texas to equal, hunter as he was,

Finally the other paused and gave a low chirp sounding like a cricket.

This was instantly answered, and in a moment a couple of persons appeared, rising out of a clump of stunted oaks near at hand.

To Rock's joy he recognized one of them as Mark Hanson!

When the two had expressed their joy at meeting again, the Texan turned to the other, and saw in the dim starlight, a tall, middle-aged man of rather commanding form.

"Jeems Hoppers!" cried he, in surprise. "Do my peepers look blind, or is this Leon Cassa?"

"You are not mistaken, Mr. Randel," said the other, extending his hand and grasping the hardy miner's with a cordial gripe; "I am Leon Cassa. But have you found aught of Lenore?"

Receiving in reply all the others had learned, he became despondent.

"Oh, my child!" he groaned, "shall we save you? How you must be suffering! We must find her, or I shall go frantic. I cannot go back to her mother without her!"

"Pardon me," interrupted Mark; "I think I see a way to find her. You say, Rock and Wind, that Warner has gone to a cave to get her. Now since you left us, Wind Gray, to go in search of the outlaw, I have done a little work myself, and I am pretty certain I have discovered that cavern, which seems to be their rendezvous. It's only a few rods above here. Let's go there and see what we can find."

Quickly agreeing to the proposition, the others followed him toward the place.

Allow us to digress here with a few words of explanation.

Leon Cassa, when attacked at Silverstone Lodge by Warner's Valley Guard, as coming from Peura to the "Lower Claim," which lay a few miles below, saw Lenore torn away and carried off captive.

With his attendants, he succeeded in beating off his assailants after a fierce fight, and gaining the valley below, managed to escape.

As soon as possible, after leaving his wife at a safe place, he started to rescue his daughter.

In going to Silverstone for assistance he met Mark Hanson, who told him how useless it would be for him to look for aid there, but heartily offered to do all he could himself.

Soon after they ran across the Mad Miner, who fell in with them, and who proved a valuable friend.

After going a short distance Mark paused.

"That dark place yonder is the entrance to the cave," he said, pointing to an opening that was seen in the bank above the creek that flowed here. "All is quiet now, and perhaps we had better lie in wait here awhile."

This locality was where Seth and Charles Harlow had been surprised by the outlaws.

Acting upon the suggestion of Mark, they drew back into deeper shade and waited.

They were not kept in suspense long before they heard some one coming toward them.

He proved to be Flying Ned.

"Randal Rock! jess let me dig his funeral!" hissed The-Man-from-Texas.

"Twon't do," warned Mark. But while the words lingered on his lips, the outlaw was seen to reel to and fro, and with a low cry sunk

down upon the rocks that were piled on the stream's shore.

"He's dead!" whispered the Mad Miner, while his eyes flashed in the darkness with unusual fire.

Leon Cassa was perhaps the most startled. Not one of them had moved hand or foot, as far as he had seen. Who had done the deed?

He asked the question of the others; but Rock attempted the only reply.

"'Tis some spook or other es don't rest easy. Ef 'twa'n't fer Miss Lenore, I'd git."

Full half an hour passed and nothing had occurred to awaken interest.

"We shall do no good by lying here," said Leon Cassa, getting impatient.

"I chip with ye," replied Rock.

"Boys," Mark said, "I propose we explore that cave."

"I chip ag'in," exclaimed the Texan.

"Very well, Rock; you and I will hazard the undertaking, while Mr. Cassa and Wind continue the watch here."

After some protestations on the part of the others, Mark and Rock prepared to carry out their purpose.

Leaving their rifles with the others, as they would do better to depend on their revolvers in such work, the twain slowly approached the cavern's mouth.

Nothing was heard from within, and cautiously parting the bushes that nearly hid the entrance, they entered the Cimmerian way.

How far they had progressed, it was impossible to tell in the darkness before they heard the sound of voices.

Pausing, they heard footsteps approaching them. Ha! not only from their front, but from behind!

"We must git one side or we're a goner!" hissed Rock.

Suddenly the glare of a torch shone in the space beyond.

One word fell from the lips of Mark Hanson, and that told all:

"Lost!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"HYARI SCOOT!"

NEARER and brighter shone the light ahead, and louder grew the footsteps behind.

"Down!" whispered Rock, "close to the side."

Crouching in the darkness with bated breath they watched the approach of their foes in front.

Suddenly a sharp scream rung through the place.

'Twas a woman's voice!

Again the startling cry echoed and re-echoed through the cavern.

"'Tis Miss Lenore! and she's in peril!" exclaimed The-Man-from-Texas, half aloud.

"Kem on; thar's fun ahead!"

Nothing loth, Mark followed.

The light in front had stopped. Ay, as they started forward it disappeared.

"Quick!" cried Hanson, as another appeal for help was heard, "quick, or we shall be too late!"

They tried to advance faster, but in the blackness it was impossible.

Their foes, better acquainted with the place, were able to move much more swiftly.

"We are corraled!" ejaculated Rock, as he ran against an angle of the wall.

Again they heard the imploring shriek, and this time near by.

Then came the words in a coarse voice:

"Stop that girl's noise, or blow her brains out."

"We are running the varmints to their hole," said the Texan. "Ha! look, Mark! Hyar the coyotes are!"

As they turned the corner of the ledge a flood of light suddenly flashed upon them, nearly blinding their eyes.

As soon as they recovered their sight they saw before them a sort of chamber in the cavern which, illuminated by a row of torches stuck in the crevices of the wall, was seen to be of considerable size.

Sitting here and there in groups of two and three were a dozen or more of coarse-featured, roughly dressed men.

Upon one side, securely bound, our adventurers saw Lenore, looking wan and haggard after what she had undergone.

"Why in the world don't the cap'en come?" growled one of the lot, arising with a yawn. "If he thinks of starting for Drytown to-night it is time for us to be moving."

"Oh! sir, take me to my parents. Have mercy for me, and father will pay you well," cried the suffering captive.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!" laughed the desperado.

"But—"

"Enough said. Hark! I thought I heard the cap'n coming."

The others arose, and with the speaker listened for the coming of their chief.

Rock and Mark could hear their enemy close upon them.

"It won't do for us to be caught here," whispered Hanson. "Isn't there a chance to turn aside, so as to let them pass?"

"I think not; but we can go a little further."

Though they could see the outlaws plainly, the others had not discovered them yet.

Very cautiously they crawled along the passage, fearful lest every movement should betray them.

They were now in a narrow passway that led directly into the main room.

Rock saw that there was no retreat.

"It's sart'in destruction!" he said; "but, let's chalk our checks and pitch the game high. Ha! hyar they come! Now for the fun!"

"Look!" exclaimed Mark, in a tone more earnest than prudent; "there seems to be a passage leading from the other side. Sha'n't we do better to make a rush for it than to remain cooped up here?"

There was no time for speculation.

"Josh Cricket! I guess ye are level!" replied the Texan. "Kem on like a mad buffler, and we'll tear 'em like an 'arthquake in a pig-pen!"

Just as the throng behind turned the angle of the wall, the two miners sprung to their feet directly in front of them,

Then, with a whoop that would have done Rock credit in his younger days, he dashed wildly forward into the midst of the outlawed horde closely followed by Mark.

Terrified, the bandits sprung to their feet, and leaped back against the cavern side, where they cowered for a moment in mad affright.

The onset of our adventurers had been so sudden that they were for the moment paralyzed with awe; and in that brief interval the twain reached the further side and plunged into the darkness beyond.

Quickly arousing, the outlaws filled the place with cries of alarm; and then those approaching joined the others.

Buck Warner was at the head of the first.

"What is it?" he demanded furiously, as he witnessed his followers' consternation.

When told what had happened, he cried fiercely:

"Are you fools or cowards? Some one has gained entrance here and we are lost, unless we can capture and put them out of the way. Come; we must hunt them down."

At the lead of the disconcerted horde he dashed into the passage in hot pursuit of the fugitives, his torch lighting up the place far in advance, disclosing their retreating forms in the distance ahead.

"There they go!" cried Gold-dust Buck, hoarsely. "Come on, and they are ours!"

"Whoop—hooray!" yelled The-Man-from-Texas in defiant response, and darting with Mark into a side passage suddenly disappeared.

"Furies!" thundered Warner, "tis that Texan dog, and they'll escape!"

Dashing forward through the unknown windings of the cave, Rock and his companion managed to keep clear from the range of the firearms of their pursuers.

At last, however, they were forced to pause. The aperture had become so low that to continue further they must crawl along.

"We are cornered," said Rock. "Git out yer shooters. Hyar they kem!"

"Here is a niche in the wall," exclaimed Mark, as he made the discovery in the dark. "Let's hide in there, and perhaps they will not see us."

They could certainly do no better, and in a moment they crawled into the narrow and rugged crevice in the ledge.

Swinging his torch before him, Buck Warner led his followers into the defile, until he was forced to pause because of the lowness of the place.

"It can't be they came this way," he muttered. "More likely they kept to the left."

"But I am sure I saw one of them come this way just as our torch lit up the corner here."

"Then they have crawled into the passage ahead. But we should run into a pretty trap by following. We will set a guard here, and explore the passage back here."

"But, cap'n, ain't this the passway that kems out in the main cavern?" asked one just back of him.

"By the Golden Cavel you are right, Stockton Sharp! And if they have gone there they will escape into the valley, and we have lost them. Come, quick, and we will cut them off."

Quickly retracing their steps the outlaws rushed back for the principal apartment of the underground cell.

Though the leader had stood within three feet of the hiding fugitives, he had not seen them.

"Mark," said Rock, as they heard the bandits retreating, "let's follow this out, and ef it leads out whar them coyotes says, perhaps we can rescue Miss Lenore and levant afore 'em varmints spot us."

"Forward then, quick!" answered Mark. "I am with you."

"Hyar I scoot. Now fer the fun!"

CHAPTER XVII.

ROCK'S FATE.

With great difficulty the hardy miners crept along the low and narrow way.

Once Rock, who was ahead, paused and declared he could go no further. But repeating his efforts, he at last succeeded, and a moment later he saw the glimmer of a light in the distance.

"Don't waste enny powder, but give it to the niggers hot. We are almost 'mong 'em!"

A little after he came in full sight of the scene.

He saw again Lenore Cassa, still bound, and now surrounded by three guards.

"Two fer me and one fer ye, Mark. Are you revely like a trapped beaver?"

"Yes; but there come the others!"

"Let 'em hop! We hev fooled long enough. Ken, ye dig the funeral o' one 'em cusses and I will t'others. Then ye look arter the gal and I'll kiver our retreat fer the valley. Now!"

Like panthers springing on their prey, the two bounded into the light, and before the frightened trio of outlaws could meet their attack they were hurled upon the rocks lifeless.

At the same moment the cavern was filled by the report of firearms, and a volley of bullets flew about the daring miners' heads.

Rock began to empty his revolver with deadly effect, and the wild yells and shrieks fairly deafened the ears of all.

Mark, acting promptly, rushed to the rescue of Lenore, and quickly severing the ligature that bound her, he lifted her in his arms and bore her swiftly for the exit of the fearful place.

Unharned he reached the passage.

In that flash of a moment the horde threw themselves upon Rock, but slowly retreating he kept them at a distance by the deadly shots from his pistols.

Rock soon spent his last shot, and drawing his knife he fought like a tiger to cut his way through the demoniac mass.

Protecting Lenore as best he could, Mark was doing equally as good work. In the midst of the wild melee, a shout came from the mouth of the cave. Friends and foes heard it, and trembled alike lest it should prove an enemy. Along the passage came rushing feet, and in an instant a sharp voice cried:

"What's up?"

'Twas the Mad Miner!

Before Mark or Rock could answer, he understood it all, and closely followed by Leon Cassa he sprung into the combat.

In a flash the lights were extinguished, and

no one was visible in the darkness that succeeded.

"This way, Rock!" cried Mark, as he blindly groped his way along the passage.

The-Man-from-Texas, guided by Mark's words, was enabled to gain his companions.

As they hurried along, they could hear their pursuers close behind. At last, to their joy, they reached the outer world.

"Quick! We must flee while we can!" cried Leon Cassa in excitement.

"But look hyar!" The-Man-from-Texas said; "I reckon we have treed the coyotes, Mark; ye and Mister Cassa jess git with Miss Lenore, and Wind and me will jess keep the varmints in their den 'til ye are safe. See how slick we can do it? I tell ye thar'll be fun, so scat!"

As the aperture leading to the cave was little more than large enough to admit a man's form, it would be an easy thing to hold the outlaws in their retreat as long as they desired.

Quickly hastening down the hollow, Mark, with Leon Cassa and Lenore disappeared.

Wild Wind, with a cocked revolver in either hand, took a position before the cavern opposite to that held by The-Man-from-Texas.

Only a few moments passed, however, when they heard wild shouts down the ravine, then followed the report of firearms!

"I'll bet my top-knot they hev been 'tacked by the savages!" hissed Rock.

The cries bore the unmistakable accent of the red-men.

"Look out for the coyotes in there, Wind. I am going to their resky!" and Rock bounded down the valley to reach a scene of wild fighting.

Mark and his companions had been met by Evil Eyes and his Indians, and the fugitives were fighting for life.

Rock uttered a yell that startled the red-skins, and sprung madly into their midst.

The chief, with a dozen others, tore Lenore from her father's protection, and was in the act of bearing her away when Mark saw her peril and leaped forward to her rescue.

"My God! that is too much!" cried Rock, and sent his deadly blows right and left till he mowed a path to the spot.

In a breath the horde closed about him, and, covered with wounds, while he fought as only a strong man at bay can fight, he at last was overpowered and dropped to the earth, to be instantly pinned by the demoniac foe.

In the brief spell that the red-men turned upon their conquered enemy, Leon Cassa seized Lenore and fled.

When the savages started in pursuit, they were suddenly terrified by a wild cry that awoke the valley, and in an instant one of their number fell dead; then another, and still another, when they actually fled in terror, leaving the slain behind, crying:

"The Silent Slayer!"

As the Indians disappeared, Mark Hanson staggered to his feet, and was about to turn to Rock when he heard others coming, and expecting they were Buck Warner and his gang, he sought concealment.

Discovering, a moment later, that his fears were true, he sought safety in flight; and though

weak from the loss of blood from his wound that was deep and painful, he succeeded in overtaking Mr. Cassa and Lenore.

Not daring to tarry there, the three hastened away and escaped.

Poor Rock and Wind Gray! They waited for them anxiously. But though days rolled into weeks they did not come; and at last they were counted with the dead.

One more scene and we will draw the veil on that night's work.

Gold-dust Buck reached the scene of the fight to find The-Man-from-Texas among the fallen.

Turning the body upon its side, he found life was not extinct. No. He moved; he breathed; he opened his eyes and glared wildly around.

"You are dying, Rock Randel!" cried the desperado, exultantly.

"I know it!" faltered the stricken one.

"And I have triumphed at last as I said I would!" cried Warner, with fiendish satisfaction.

The other started up, and while a wild light gleamed from his glassy eyes, he cried:

"Yes, Gold-dust Buck, ye hev corraled me at last. But I ain't conquered yet. Though Rock Randel won't tramp the valley any more in flesh and blood, his spook shall haunt Silverstone mine till ye and every coyote is drove out and honest men hold the lead! D'ye hyar? Rock Randel hes sed it, and he dies game!"

There was something so awe-inspiring in the Texan's looks that the spectators fell back in dismay.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ROCK FULFILLS HIS VOW.

A MONTH has passed.

Mark Hanson has nearly recovered from his wounds, and at the home of the Cassas he has found the best of treatment, which has had much to do toward his rapid convalescence.

Ay, in the company of the fair Lenore he has indeed seemed blessed. Long ere this the brave, generous-hearted miner has learned to love her, and happy in the answer she has given him, he looks forward to a joyous future.

He has not been back to the mines nor will he now; since the untimely fate of poor Rock he has no interest there.

But how has it gone at Silverstone? We will return to the ill-starred settlement.

Perhaps not "ill-starred" now, though, for since the departure of The-Man-from-Texas, affairs have gone along very quietly.

Oregon Dick has the complete control of the mine, and preparations have been made to work the ore in Golden Cave.

Stockton Sam Sharp has become an overseer under him, and no longer fearing the hand of justice, he boasts of his assistance in driving the Texan from the valley.

Ah, strange as it may seem, Gold-dust Buck, the dread edict of outlawry no longer hanging over his head, lords it over Gold-dust Hollow with all the pomposity of a king.

Wild Wind, the Mad Miner, hangs no more about Silverstone, nor has he been seen since the night Rock perished.

Thus we find affairs at the city.

A party of horsemen under the lead of Oregon Dick were nearing Silverstone after a journey to Gold-dust, a settlement half a dozen miles down the valley.

The day was nearly spent, though the riders moved leisurely along under the base of Silver Mountain.

The superintendent of the mines was in advance, while another rode by his side.

Suddenly a wild cry ringing through the valley caused the cavalcade to draw rein, and all turned to look for its solution.

Though their gaze was turned away but a moment, judge of their dismay when they were about to start on to find one of their number missing!

The horse ridden by Oregon Dick's companion was riderless!

"Where's Dan?" exclaimed the first to notice his disappearance, in amazement.

"Hyar's yer pard, old coyotes!" cried a hoarse voice from above.

Looking quickly upward, they saw standing on the cliff that reared its precipitous side over their heads, the giant form of Rock Randel, holding before him in his strong grasp their strangling companion!

With cries of terror their eyes became fixed upon the awe-inspiring spectacle.

It was truly The-Man-from-Texas, looking wilder than ever. His raven hair seemed of twice its usual length; his eyes gleamed and flashed like coals of fire as they shone over the head of their helpless companion.

Had he come back from the dead to haunt the valley as he had told?

"Shoot him!" cried Lane; and a dozen rifles were leveled.

But the form of their companion shielded the other, and not one dared to shoot.

Oregon Dick was deadly pale.

"Speak, for God's sake, Rock Randel! and tell us what you want!"

Again the Texan laughed.

The victim held in his viselike gripe writhed and struggled madly.

"Let's git!" exclaimed one of the terrified beholders; but in the narrow path it was impossible to pass those ahead.

The leader gave utterance to a fearful oath.

"Curse you, madman!" he yelled, "release that man!"

Maddened by the Texan's silence, he shrieked, hoarsely:

"Take that!" and fired his rifle with reckless haste.

With its sharp report rung out the victim's cry, and Dick Lane's companion was thrown across his horse's withers, shot by his own hand!

With a shriek of horror, the murderer nearly fell from his saddle.

A moment Rock watched the spellbound men, and then, with a laugh of derision, disappeared.

A volley of bullets was sent after him, though with what effect none could tell.

"Is Dan dead?" one at last recovered enough to ask.

"Stone dead!" came the reply. "But let's git afore we are rubbed out."

Trembling with dire forebodings the cavalcade resumed their course.

To their great relief nothing more was seen of the dread Texan.

As soon as they reached Silverstone they hastened to the Bang-up, where they told their strange story to wondering listeners.

In the midst of Oregon Dick's strange recital another came rushing in, crying:

"I have seen him! I have seen him!"

"Who?" cried the amazed bystanders.

"The-Man-from-Texas or his ghost!"

"Where did you see him?" asked Lane.

"Down by the diggings! He looked awful! Eyes like balls of fire! He had his long rifle and was going to shoot me when I fell in a dead faint! When I came to he was gone, but I found the body of Jim Kelley near the creek the last spark of life gone! I think he shot him!"

The news spread like wildfire and Silverstone was all excitement.

Gold-dust Buck hastened to his confederate to learn the full particulars.

When he had listened to the other's story he exclaimed:

"Oh, bosh! you were frightened, Dick, and only imagined you saw him. I know that Texan is dead, and the dead never trouble the living. But you have made a pretty muss by your report."

"Ef Rock Randel is dead, then I saw his ghost!" protested the other. "You said yourself the Texan swore he'd haunt the valley, and I tell you, boss, I believe he means to do it!"

"Bah! I should like to see him!"

The two were standing on a street corner in the shadows of the deepening twilight.

Warner had scarcely given expression to his speech as a low laugh rung on their ears.

Starting up in surprise, they saw the very object of their words watching them but a few rods off!

Oregon Dick shrunk back in abject terror.

Clutching his long rifle menacingly, the Texan, whether man or spirit, glared upon them in silence, his face gleaming deadly white in the semi-darkness, and the golden adornments upon his person glowing like burning embers!

CHAPTER XIX.

ROCK GIVES NEW TERROR.

"WHAT do you want, Rock Randel?" Gold-dust Buck at last cried.

The-Man-from-Texas replied with a hollow, sardonic laugh.

"He won't speak!" Oregon Dick said. "But mercy! he's going to shoot!"

"Hold, Texan!" cried Warner, as the other seemed on the point of raising his rifle; "can't you speak and tell us whether you are man or demon?"

The only answer was another laugh.

With an oath Buck drew a revolver, but in the moment his eyes left the mysterious miner he vanished.

"He's gone," declared Lane, with a long-drawn breath of relief.

Warner stared at the empty space ahead in silence.

"You believe me now, don't you?"

"I'd give a hundred dollars to know if that was Rock Randel or not!"

"Of course it was. Who or what else could he be?"

It was plain that the reckless desperado leader was greatly agitated by the Texan's mysterious appearance. Ay, vividly came back to his mind the wild declaration made by the dying owner of Gold-dust Hollow.

Was it possible he was going to keep his word?

"Let's go to the Bang-up," he said finally, and the twain reached the saloon to find it filled with excited men.

Uppermost in every mind, and the sole theme of their talk, was the reappearance of Rock Randel!

Some declared it was his ghost, while a few were bold enough to assert that it was him in flesh and blood.

"I reckon it makes nary difference!" one exclaimed. "He's going to make times lively enny way. It's sart'in justice, too, for this valley was his jess es much es I own my shooter, and blame him fer fightin' fer his own."

It was a bold, reckless speech to utter in such a crowd, and the words had barely fallen from his lips, when a broad-shouldered listener stepped quickly forward and exclaimed angrily:

"Dare ye say es much fer that long-hair dog o' Texas, Gus Verne? I never did like him, and he had no bizness byar!"

"This is a free land, Dave. Rock always used me well, and I shall ever stand by him as a friend."

"You will, eh? Jess take that then, and know ye ain't my friend when ye set up yer clap fer thet sneakin' Texan!" and the speaker made a furious lunge at the other, who dextrously threw him to the floor.

Staggering to his feet with a bitter oath, the wretch drew a pistol, and before any one could interpose would have killed the brave speaker, but a bullet sped past the excited throng of beholders and entered his assailant's temple, when he dropped dead.

For a moment all were spellbound.

Then the amazed crowd saw Rock Randel standing in the doorway, rifle in hand!

Before they recovered from their terror he was gone.

All had seen him now, and no one that night cared to mention his name.

With another day the miners resumed their work in the mines.

A squad of half a dozen, under Oregon Dick, went to the Golden Cave to begin work there.

In the meanwhile those at the regular diggings were steadily plying their picks, or busy handling their pans.

Stockton Sharp had the management of the place, and while passing from one gang of work to another he was seen to pause with a wild, haggard look.

"My God!" he cried; "I am a dead man!"

He had hardly given utterance to the startling exclamation, when the report of a rifle was heard, and the doomed man fell forward, dead!

In wild trepidation the miners seized their weapons just as a mocking laugh broke on their ears.

Looking up the mountain side, they saw standing on an overhanging rock in plain sight, Rock Randell!

In an instant half a hundred rifles belched forth their fiery contents.

When the smoke had cleared away nothing was to be seen of the Texan.

"There's blood on the rock!" cried one. "Let's hunt him down, if he ain't already dead!"

Quickly following the speaker's lead, the miners to a man sprung up the hillside in pursuit of their dreaded foe.

At last, after a bootless search, they returned once more to the valley.

"Where's Sam's body?" some one asked, as they looked for it where he had fallen.

"Here, look! see! there it is!" cried another, in a frightened tone, pointing above their heads.

The others saw in amazement the form of their overseer suspended in the air right above them!

A strong cord had been secured around the neck and the other fastened to the branch of a tree above, so that the remains of Stockton Sharp were swaying to and fro in a most hideous manner!

As the astonished beholders watched in silence the strange spectacle, a wild yell aroused them, and then was heard in an unearthly voice the cry:

"Gold! gold! gold! gold!"

Upon the same spot where The-Man-from-Texas had been seen a little while before, they now beheld a tall, wild-looking figure clothed in flowing, tattered garb and wearing a mass of white hair and beard!

"Wild Wind, the Mad Miner!" they cried, in surprise.

In a moment the strange being darted down the cliff's deep side and was seen no more.

It was hours later before the startled miners commenced work again, and even then many of them left for Silverstone to spread the news of Stockton Sam's death.

While this was transpiring, Oregon Dick and his few chosen ones started to prospect the cave of gold.

Reaching there they found Gold-Dust Buck in waiting.

Lane was surprised to see also Evil Eyes, the half-breed.

"It's all right!" exclaimed Warner to his confederate chief. "I could do no better than to let the Indian have a share after what he has done for us."

Oregon Dick was silent. Here was a turn in the programme that he had not expected. However, he suppressed all indignation, and appeared satisfied.

"There is gold enough here to make us all rich!" exclaimed Gold-dust Buck as they paused before the cave. "I tell you, boys, this is worth working for. Don't blame the Texan for the fight he made."

"He's gone now," said the half-breed, with a villainous smile—"brave wipe him out!"

"Hark!" hissed Dick. "I hear the stroke of a pick-ax in there!"

The others listened a moment, when they, too, plainly heard the sound.

"Who can it be?" ejaculated Buck Warner.

Then waiting a moment longer and satisfying himself they were not mistaken, he said:

"Come, follow me; we must explore the place and warn away whoever is here."

"Me stay and keep watch," cried Evil Eyes, who had no desire to face the perils of the darkness within. "Mebbe others come to trap pale-faces."

"Good! you have a long head, chief."

Fearlessly entering the cavern, Gold-dust Buck and his men soon disappeared in its recess.

After going a rod or so they found it pitch dark.

"No one can be here in this black hole," muttered one. "We must have been mistaken about hearing a pick."

"Hist!" spoke the leader.

Plainer than before they again heard the sound.

"Some one is here!" and he groped his way blindly forward, until turning an angle in the passage, he suddenly saw the dim light of a flickering torch.

Imperfectly seen by the weird blaze was a miner vigorously plying his pick.

"There he is," whispered Gold-dust Buck, "and as I live, it is that looney, Wind Gray!"

As if catching the sound of the words, the unknown paused in his work and glared wildly around.

"I'll fix him!" muttered Warner, and in an instant the report of his rifle filled the cave and fairly deafened their ears.

With the shot the light was extinguished and impenetrable darkness followed.

The half-terrified miners felt the rush of air as a body swept past them, and then a death-like stillness hung about them.

With one accord they retraced their way.

Reaching daylight once more, they breathed easier.

Looking for the half-breed chief, they found his body near where they had left him, lifeless!

Protruding from his person they saw the haft of a huge knife!

CHAPTER XX.

WILD WIND'S DOOM.

MUTE with terror, the miners gazed in silence upon their dead companion.

At last Gold-dust Buck said:

"'Tis the work of that Mad Miner!"

"Well, at least, that Indian is out of the way. I, for one, sha'n't shed any tears," affirmed Oregon Dick.

He had hardly uttered the words when one of the men nearest him fell dead!

Horried, the others sprung back.

A crimson stream welled out of a tiny wound on the temple of the slain.

Not a sound had been heard.

In amazement the little group gazed around.

Not a living thing to be seen!

A moment of awful suspense.

Then a second of their number fell in the same mysterious way!

Consternation now seized the remainder.

In the midst of the excitement Rock Randel appeared on the scene.

Pausing abruptly a few rods distant, he half raised his rifle and faced them defiantly.

He then was the slayer of their companions!

Too much frightened to think of molesting him, Gold-dust Buck, fearing for his own safety, cried:

"Quick! for the cave!"

In an instant the cowardly miners fled into the cavern.

The-Man-from-Texas gave a mocking laugh as he saw them take to flight, but offered no further molestation.

"I reckon ye are penned now!" he muttered grimly, as he seated himself upon a rock near at hand. "Guess I won't let ye kem out jess yet!"

Time passed and still The-Man-from-Texas maintained his watch in front of the cavern.

Those within would fain have shot him, but he kept out of their range.

But little was said for an hour.

"I can't stand this much longer!" ejaculated the leader at last. "Let's risk our chances and charge on the Texan dog. We are four against him, and we are fools to act so much like cowards!"

"Is he there now?" asked one.

"Yes; grim and motionless as—"

"Hist! I heard something behind us!" exclaimed Oregon Dick in a low tone.

Listening for a moment the others heard or seemed to hear the sound of footsteps.

"Some one is coming this way!"

As Gold-dust Buck uttered the words, a sharp exclamation was wrung from the lips of one of the others.

Then a fierce struggle seemed to be taking place, though in the darkness nothing could be seen.

"Oh, mercy!" groaned the man. "I am killed!"

His companions heard the words in terror, and knew a life-and-death combat was taking place right by their side. Yet they were powerless to aid their friend.

Who was this unseen foe?

"He's coming for me!" yelled Oregon Dick, the next breath; and, with a despairing shriek, he rushed for the outside, forgetting the danger menacing him there.

Gold-dust Buck and one other followed. The fourth had fallen in the strange contest in the dark.

Oregon Dick gained the exit of the cavern—reached it to stand face to face with the Texan avenger!

In the twinkling of an eye the *spang* of Randel's rifle was heard, and the doomed outlaw-miner had run his race!

Buck Warner turned ashen pale as he saw the dread weapon leveled at his own person.

Before The-Man-from-Texas could fire the second shot, the valley rung with a wild shout, and twenty armed men sprung into the gully.

They were miners from Silverstone who had grown uneasy over the non-arrival of Warner's party, and had come to their rescue.

"Don't let the Texan escape!" cried Gold-dust Buck.

In an instant Rock was surrounded.

"All I ask is a shot at that Buck Warner!" he cried. But the desperado had cleared his sight. Rock Randel's time had seemed to come.

"Not yet!" he cried, with a hoarse laugh.

"Death to ye!" yelled the leader of the throng.

Another mocking laugh and Dandy Rock bounded swiftly toward his encircling foes.

Was he mad? 'Twas rushing to certain death!

At the second leap he reached them; then crouching close to the earth for an instant he sprung high into the air, and passing fairly over their heads, touched lightly upon the ground behind them!

Before the astonished assailants could comprehend the daring and surprising feat, and turn to renew their attack, he was fleeing down the valley at a flying rate.

A few shots were sent after him, but none stayed his flight.

"Has he escaped?" exclaimed Gold-dust Buck.

"Yes; he's gone like a streak down the ravine. You might as well think of catching a flash of lightning!"

"But we sha'n't have any peace until he is caught! Look at poor Dick here, slain by him. We must hunt that Texan down to death if we value our own lives!"

"He ain't no mortal—"

"Gold! gold! gold! gold!"

Every sound was hushed by the wild cry, which caused the miners to turn pale with dread.

Then the flash of a gun was seen and one of the crowd, without warning, dropped lifeless!

The others saw upon the narrow ledge that hung over the Golden Cave that wild being designated as the Mad Miner.

He laughed in an unearthly tone, and waved over his head a rusty rifle.

Gold-dust Buck saw what the others failed to.

The rock upon which the mysterious unknown was standing was completely isolated from the main body, save by the narrow place where he had gained it.

Springing forward to command this Warner cried:

"Capture him, boys! He is ours!"

Understanding the movement the miners surrounded the cliff at its base, and some began to scale its sides.

Seeing that all retreat was cut off the lunatic gave a shrill cry of terror.

Then, as he saw the inevitable capture that seemed to threaten him he suddenly leaped out over his assailants and went headlong into the gully that yawned fifty feet below.

Reaching the bank above a few moments after, the miners saw that his body had been crushed into a shapeless mass.

"I must know if possible who he was," declared Warner, descending into the place with considerable difficulty.

Though the remains were frightfully disfigured, Gold-dust Buck recognized them at a glance now that he was close to them.

"Strange I should not have known him before!" he muttered, as he climbed up the bank.

"But it's a load from my mind to know he is out of the world at last."

"Who was he?" asked the lookers-on in chorus.

Before Warner could reply half a dozen men came rushing to the spot, the leader crying excitedly:

"We have got him!"

"Who?" was asked in surprise.

"The-Man-from-Texas! Rock Randel! We were coming up from the city, when we run across him and corraled him slick!"

Then as the followers of the speaker reached the place, all saw that they really had at last the most dreaded and yet most respected man in Gold-dust Hollow a captive.

Truly the war must end now.

CHAPTER XXI.

DANDY ROCK'S DOOM.

GOLD-dust Buck glared upon the captive with a look of fiendish satisfaction.

"This is the best day's work you ever did, boys. You deserve a holiday for this; and you shall have it, too."

"What shall we do with him?" asked the leader of the captors.

"Do with him? Hang him to the first tree you come to!"

"Is it The-Man-from-Texas or his ghost?" asked one of the incredulous spectators.

"It's Rock Randel every time. But he's a live coon! I wonder we corraled him as we did. He never offered to fight us and only tried to dust, which ain't at all like him."

"I tell ye, it's his spirit, and I sha'n't be s'prised to see him fly right over our heads like smoke!" exclaimed an old gray-headed miner, who had a strong belief in the supernatural.

"Git out, Joe Plummer! Ef he ain't mortal what makes him so quiet now?"

"Come, what's the use of all this talk?" interrupted Warner. "Let's rope him at once, and have the affair over. That Crazy Miner is dead and when we rid ourselves of this accursed Texan, Gold-dust Hollow is indeed free!"

"Wild Wind dead!" exclaimed Rock, speaking for the first time.

"Yes, dead! His body lies at the bottom of the gully all crushed into jelly!" replied Buck, exultantly.

"Then I'm a goner!" ejaculated The-Man-from-Texas, under his breath.

"Come, men; let's rope the coyote and have it done with. I am anxious to get back to the city."

"What! without any show fer him to speak for hisself?" exclaimed one of the leading spirits of the crowd.

"What! Vic Haven! do you hesitate to lynch such a desperado as that Texan wolf, who has shed more blood than any twelve Indians in California?"

"I know it," admitted the miner; "but he did it in a square fight and trying to defend his own."

"Do you call that a square fight when men hide in the bushes and shoot down their victims in cold blood?"

"No. But I say, hunted as he has been, Rock Randel has only done what all of us would have

done in his circumstances. He has made a square fight, and I say give him a fair show," declared Vic Haven, boldly.

"Do you hear that, boys?" cried Warner to his followers. "I say that Texan should die like a dog. He has taken more innocent lives than any desperado in California, and all without just cause!"

"You lie, Buck Warner!" cried Rock, fiercely, unable to stand more. "Men o' Silverstone," turning to the crowd, "I hev' no war ag'in' ye. All I ask is fer a fair chance to dig my row with that coyote. Let me meet him in a fair trial, hand to hand, and the one who wins shall be the best man. Let me dig his funeral and ye can do with me es ye want to. Ef he corrals me, all right."

"That's the talk!" cried a bystander. "Let 'em square 'counts, and save us the trouble."

"Let 'em go it. I bet on the long-haired coon!"

"Rope the Texan!"

"Lynch him!"

Such were the cries taken up by the excited throng.

Gold-dust Buck trembled lest the prisoner should gain his liberty. He had no desire to face Rock in a combat.

Vic Haven saw that a free fight was imminent. He saw but one course open, and he took it by saying, quickly:

"Look here, boys; let's act like sensible men. We want every one to have a fair shake. Let's take the Texan to Silverstone and give him a fair trial. Whatever the verdict is follow it up!"

"Agreed!" came the hearty response.

"Let him levant!"

"Let 'em two hev it out!"

'Mid the confusion of like cries Buck Warner was forced to acquiesce.

Thus all headed for the city, and Dandy Rock a prisoner was borne along by the excited mob.

It was nearly night when Silverstone was reached.

Here the captors were met by the excited inhabitants to whom the news had flown like wildfire.

Among the spectators and pressing forward to grasp his hand was Mark Hanson.

"It seems like meeting one from the dead, Rock," he said cordially. "But, keep up your spirits in this ordeal and you shall find you have true friends left yet."

Randel murmured his thanks.

"Is Wild Wind really gone under?" he asked anxiously.

"There is no doubt of that. There are twenty here who saw him meet his fate."

"Then old Rock Randel is ready to pass in his checks as soon as he sees that Gold-dust coyote gets justice done him. I shall leave the Hollow in your hands and Temperance Tim's."

Before Mark could reply, the jostling crowd pressed him away.

As it was so late in the day, Rock's trial was put over by vote until the morrow.

Accordingly, he was carried to the post-office, and there under a strong guard left for safe-keeping.

Thus the day waned and night came on.

While the excited miners of Silverstone were talking over the strange events of the previous week, Gold-dust Buck was devising a desperate scheme whereby he might outwit the friends of Rock and make his own triumph certain, for he felt that if the latter had a trial he would escape. He missed Oregon Dick and Cooney Burke now.

With half a dozen chosen followers he would wrest Randel from his keepers' hands and put him to death before the light of another sun.

About midnight, the drowsy guards standing outside of the apartment that held the Texan were suddenly overpowered, and Warner with his horde burst into the room where Buck lay half-asleep.

Seizing him rudely, they bore him out of the house.

"Hang him to the first tree!" hissed the leader. "At last, Rock Randel, you are doomed! Bear him along boys, lively!"

Rock strove to free his hands, but he was powerless.

Like fiends incarnate, the lynchers bore him a few rods from the building, when they paused under a huge tree.

"We can find no better place!" exclaimed the desperado chief. "Up with him!"

Without a single show for mercy the Texan was dragged to the slaughter.

Before the ruffians could fix the rope around his neck, however, hurried footsteps startled them.

"Quick, for your life!" hissed Gold-dust Buck.

The same instant a man sprung to the spot closely followed by others.

With yells of terror, the startled lynchers turned to flee.

"He sha'n't escape if I die for it!" cried Warner, and with a bound he leaped upon the helpless prisoner, while a knife flashed in his hand.

Rock sunk back with a cry and closed his eyes as he felt his end had come.

Again Buck Warner was thwarted.

Simultaneous with his movement a man was seen to spring from the crowd of new-comers, and with his long hair streaming in the wind rush to Rock's rescue.

In a moment he closed with the desperado in a death-grapple.

The lookers-on turned from the flying ruffians to the exciting combat, but there was no chance for others to mingle in the engagement.

Locked in each other's arms they plunged and tossed to and fro.

"Let me hev a show for the fun!" cried Rock.

Seeming to forget that he was freeing a prisoner from the hands of law, Mark Hanson quickly cut his ligatures, and The-Man-from-Texas joined the spectators just as one of the combatants arose, victor of the strife.

At first it was, in the starlight, uncertain to the crowd who had conquered, but in a moment the cry went up:

"Buck Warner is dying!"

"Served him right, too," cried Vic Haven.

"He has shown his true character in this act of to-night if never before."

"Yes! yes!" chorused the crowd. "But is Rock unhurt?"

"Wal, I reckon!" cried that worthy himself,

"he's jess the coon fer fun, my boss beaver, so gi'n us yer paws."

"Long life to Rock Randel, owner of Gold-dust Hollow! and may he be forever rid of all unprincipled foes!" cried he who had just overcome the Texan's most bitter enemy.

Unheeding who gave the cry utterance, the listeners took it up, until the air rung with its sound.

In the midst of the applause Rock turned to greet the speaker, when, to his joy and wonder, he met Wild Wind, the Mad Miner!

"Jeems Stopple! dye my eyes deceive me, or is this ye, old chap, alive and kicking?"

"It's I, every time," replied the unknown, as he grasped the other's hand, "though I thought one while I should have to give in to that desperate Warner. However, the fight is over, Rock, and your path is clear."

"Yes; and I owe my life and all to you!" he said fervently, as he held, long and firmly, the other's palm.

Ay, at last the fight for the valley of gold was ended and Rock had triumphed.

And that, after all, was his doom!

CHAPTER XXII.

PARTING FROM FRIENDS.

AROUND the dying Buck Warner gathered the spectators.

"My race is run," he said, faintly. "I have made a life-and-death struggle for the gold in this valley, but I am done for at last. The Texan was right and I was wrong, so it is only justice for him to triumph. But who was it who placed me here?"

"Wild Wind, the Mad Miner," some one said.

"Wild Wind! It can't have been him, for I saw him dead in the valley yesterday!"

"You are mistaken, for I am living yet," declared that person, approaching his side.

Warner uttered a cry of dismay as he recognized the other.

"I don't understand it!" he muttered. "But who are you, for I have decided some time since that you are not what you profess to be?"

"It is time, perhaps, that you all should know me," the unknown said, and quickly tearing off his false hair and beard, *the features of Alpine Luke were revealed to the wondering crowd!*

"I don't understand it!" exclaimed the astonished Warner.

"The explanation is this," replied Luke: "You all looked upon me as the Unlucky Miner, and wherever I went you mistrusted me. To aid Rock and work as a sort of scout for him, I adopted this disguise. Soon after I was overpowered, shot down, and supposed to have been killed by Evil Eyes and his savages. My wounds did not prove fatal; I escaped, but allowed the report of my death to pass for the truth. Since I have appeared only in my disguise as the Mad Miner."

"And a better pard never took the trail!" affirmed Rock, as he grasped again his noble friend's hand.

"But how did you come to life in the gully? I know you were dead then!"

"Another mistake of yours. By a singular coincidence my disguise looked at a distance like the dress and appearance of that singular being, the mad Calvo, who once owned this valley and has haunted it ever since, killing every one who has come in his way with that fatal rifle of his charged with 'air-powder,' so that no report is ever heard. Though his hair was white from age and mine from nature, they looked much alike; so much in fact that you must have mistaken him for me in the ravine yesterday."

"I see it all now. But how blind I have been! But tell me of the fight in the cave."

"While Rock watched you in front I came along and wishing to drive you out entered the cavern at another entrance, with what result you already know."

"It was me also whom you discovered at work in the cave. When I rushed by you, I met the half-breed at its entrance, and had to dispatch him before I could escape."

"Though I have done much, that Silent Slayer, the Mad Californian, has often been mistaken for me, and his work confounded with mine. But you might have easily distinguished us. While he relied upon his rifle solely, my weapon was the knife, and so expert have I become in its use that I can throw it half a dozen yards and be certain of my victim every time!"

The speaker paused as he noticed the sudden change taking place in the countenance of the wounded man.

Five minutes later he was no more.

At last one of the most dreaded desperadoes that ever slew his victim in Calaveras county had run his race of crime and again right had won. Cut down in the prime of manhood, educated and talented, how different might have been his end. Truly he cannot expect to reap aught but thorns who sows briars.

Silverstone was free at last.

Rock and his friends were greeted cordially on every side.

From the many stories told of the strange events which had transpired we give the following in explanation of those incidents in our narrative that may not be readily understood.

Of the mission of the Harlow brothers none could tell aught, as they perished early in their work. Both had been killed by the "Silent Slayer," who spared none who came in his way. It was he also who stole the body of Charles away and suspended it from the tree, while others were preparing a grave. The action was simply a freak of his madness. The same motive prompted him to treat the body of Stockton Sharp in like manner. Of the last appearance of the "Night Phantom," the outlaw mis-

took the body of Seth for that of Charles, the latter hanging from the sapling all the while. The remains of the unfortunate men were afterward properly interred, and over their graves blocks of granite have been raised.

Of the fight at Silverstone Ledge those under Rock fled from the fight as soon as possible. They were all, save Seth, tools of Burke's.

We think the mystery surrounding the Mad Miner has been so far removed that the rest can be dispelled with a little consideration. His work, as he said himself, had been confounded with that strange, silent rifleman. Wind aided Rock in his duel in the dark, and fled before the crowd discovered him. In fact his whole object was to assist the other and he performed his duty faithfully.

A word in regard to the "Silent Slayer."* A few years before two brothers named Calvo owned Gold-dust Hollow, but while trying to work their claim they were driven out by a gang of desperadoes led by Buck Warner. One of them maddened by a bullet wound continued to haunt the valley and became the dreaded Silent Slayer. Rock Randel received the mine from the other brother who had seen enough of war. Still the crazy Calvo followed up his vengeance. But he was never seen after that frightful leap from the Golden Cave.

The Silverstone Mine proved a grand success.

Rock shared his treasure with his gallant friends, Alpine Luke, Temperance Tim and Mark Hanson, while Vic Haven and others were not forgotten.

The Man-from-Texas became the leading spirit of the Silver Mountain district, and later, when Silverstone selected him as mayor, well might he be proud of the conquest he had won. Though rough and unlettered, no one was respected more.

Noble Rock! We dislike to part from him.

Alpine Luke, though owning a share in the mine, soon after left Gold-dust Hollow, when he found the miners still looked upon him with dread, as they still considered him the same Unlucky Miner as of old. In a claim below he became the central actor in scenes that have gained for California her notoriety.

Last, but not least, when rich enough to leave the valley, Mark led to the altar the fair Lenore, and seeking a pleasant home in Los Angeles county, the twain are living there to-day, happy and contented, with the peace and prosperity that a kind Providence has so benignly bestowed upon them.

* We would refer those who desire to know more of this strange being and his work to Pocket Library No. 137—"Dandy Rock The Man-from-Texas."

THE END.

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